THE APPRECIATOR

A collection of short stories by

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SHORT STORIES

BY

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book of short stories to my life partner madam Ruqayya Khanum

Preface

This book is a collection of short stories that were originally written in Urdu and later translated into English. These stories come from my thoughts, my surroundings, and my observations of life in Eastern society. They carry ideas about human nature, emotions, culture, and the deeper meaning of existence. Some stories are philosophical, some are psychological, and many reflect the traditions and values of our civilization.

As English is not my native language, I am aware that the style and diction of these stories may not be the same as those written by native English authors. However, I have tried my best to keep the language clear, simple, and meaningful. My main purpose is not to show perfect language, but to share ideas, feelings, and experiences with the reader. I believe that sincerity in writing is more important than perfection.

These stories are deeply connected to Eastern life. They show the beauty, struggles, and complexity of

our society. In many parts of the world, Eastern culture is sometimes misunderstood or shown in a limited way. Through this book, I have tried to present a more real and human picture of it. The characters in these stories are inspired by everyday people. Their lives, thoughts, and emotions are simple, yet meaningful. They face problems, make choices, and search for purpose, just like all human beings do.

Philosophy is an important part of this collection. Some stories ask questions about life, destiny, truth, and the nature of reality. They do not always give clear answers, but they invite the reader to think and reflect. At the same time, psychological themes are also present. The inner world of the human mind—its fears, desires, and conflicts—is explored in many stories. I have tried to show how a person's thoughts and feelings shape their actions and their life.

Translation is not an easy task. When a story moves from one language to another, some meanings, emotions, and cultural details can change. I have tried to keep the original spirit of the Urdu stories alive while making them understandable in English. There

may be places where the expression feels different, but this is part of the journey of translation. I hope readers will focus more on the message and less on the language differences.

This book is written for readers who enjoy thoughtful and meaningful stories. It is also for those who are curious about Eastern society and culture. Even if the language is simple, the ideas behind the stories are deep. I invite readers to read slowly, think about the characters, and reflect on the situations presented in the stories.

I am grateful to all those who encouraged me to write and translate these stories. Their support gave me the confidence to share my work with a wider audience. I also thank the readers, who give life to any piece of writing. Without readers, stories remain incomplete.

In the end, I hope that this collection will touch your mind and heart. If even one story makes you think differently, feel deeply, or understand something new about life, then my effort will be successful.

Muhammad Yousaf Vaseer

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The Appreciator

In the heart of Europe lay a quiet little town, cradled by the riverbank, breathing with the slow rhythm of time, untouched by the turbulent tempests of history. Its houses were wrought of wood and stone, as though sincerity itself had lent them substance. Autumn leaves fell upon their roofs like weary moments of time, wrapping themselves in the shawl of some slumbering memory. The streets here were neither so narrow that dreams would wither, nor so wide that realities would scatter to the wind.

The townsfolk lived in a delicate balance—neither cloaked in such ascetic poverty that life's comforts seemed foreign, nor so lost in the vanity of wealth that they could no longer hear the whisper of another's breath. Their faces bore the fatigue of daily toil, yet in their eyes lingered a gentle flame, a quiet ember of life, as though a faint melody on an old gramophone still played the anthem of a bygone simplicity.

At the edge of this town dwelt a man in a modest cottage, one who called himself an artist. His true name, perhaps, was

forgotten among the people, for his identity lay instead in his dishevelled hair, his hands stained with colours, and the canvases that spoke more eloquently in silence than any words could. He was a man who conversed not with speech but with lines; his countenance bore neither the harsh arrogance of the proud artist nor the defeated shadows of one crushed by hunger. He was, it seemed, a lone traveller walking the fragile thread stretched between art and humanity.

His dwelling too was peculiar—neither wholly crude nor fully refined, like a thought lingering on the frontier of art, just stepping from dream onto the threshold of reality. A window opened eastward, and through it the sun's rays descended into his studio as though a god himself touched the bristles of his brush, breathing soul into the colours.

The artist possessed not the wealth of the world, yet within his chamber there reigned a kingdom of colours, brushes, and canvases—each grain of pigment conferring upon him a majesty akin to that of kings. But this sovereignty was visible only to his own eyes; to the rest of the world he appeared no more than an ordinary man, carrying within his gaze the dream of renowned—a dream that descended nightly upon his lashes, only to scatter each morning across the waiting canvas.

In that town, painting did not hold the stature afforded to poetry or music. When people looked upon a picture, they merely murmured, "How lovely," and moved on—as one might place a fleeting hand of affection upon the head of an unfamiliar child before resuming the road. Yet the artist longed that they would pause, breathe a thoughtful sigh, and whisper, "This picture speaks to some hollow within me".

It was this yearning that had freed him from the tyranny of night and day. He poured his very life upon his canvases, craving that the world might gather it up, praise it, and remember his name.

It was upon a tender evening of spring, when the sun had gathered its rays and laid them gently in the lap of the horizon, that a quiet solemnity descended upon the town's air—such an evening as lends a curtain to dreams and a little distance from reality. It was in this hour that the artist chose to give voice to his years of silent labour.

For the first time, the veranda of his house glittered with electric lamps, glowing as though simplicity itself were being kissed by light. White sheets were draped upon the walls, and upon the floor, where once coarse sacks lay, he spread a heavy canvas, transforming it into the very soil of his artistic world. In one corner stood a wooden table bearing a jug of water, a few biscuits, and a bowl brimming with rose petals—hospitality offered in a silent yet civilised gesture.

From various quarters of the town the people began to arrive: neighbours, amateur artists, and some who came merely in wonder at why a man so quiet suddenly craved such festivity. Their eyes lingered upon each picture, then moved on—some uttering faint words of praise, others merely nodding their heads. Yet the artist searched among those faces for a single gaze that might pierce into his soul.

Altogether, some twenty to twenty-five canvases adorned the walls—but among them were four creations upon which the artist had spent the greater portion of his spirit. They were, in truth, four mirrors of his very being.

Drawn in the simplicity of a humble graphite pencil, there hung a portrait of an old woman; her wrinkles carved as though Time itself had pressed its fingers upon her face, inscribing every memory, every sorrow, every silence. Her eyes were closed, as if lost in the depths of prayer—or perhaps merely resting, wearied by the burden of the world. Behind her, there was nothing but a blank whiteness, a hollow expanse that seemed the very embodiment of her solitude.

This was no mere moment of time; it was a century distilled—an eternal mirror in which one might glimpse one's mother, one's grandmother, or even one's own reflection.

Another canvas bore the hue of an ancient imperial dream. Painted in oil, it revealed the visage of a princess, a crown of emeralds resting upon her brow, and upon her lips a half-smile—one that guarded secrets, veiled sorrows, and whispered of some unnamed rebellion yet to come. In the background stretched a sapphire sky and the faint silhouette of a golden, battlemented palace.

This portrait was no simple face; it was the testament of womanhood—her ancestral grandeur, her restraint, and her unspoken agony.

On yet another canvas, a delicate stream flowed in the lap of green hills, its waters embraced by shrubs and a solitary tree bent low, as though whispering confidences to the current. Above stretched a sky draped in a fabric of cloud-woven light and shadow, and far away, the flight of birds became the emblem of time's ceaseless passage.

This landscape belonged to no particular place; it was the image of every heart seeking repose, the dream of every eye grown weary of clamour.

And there was one painting that defied the boundaries of reason—a tempestuous rebellion of colours scattered across the canvas in an unseen order. Blue, black, red, and white conversed in their spheres, clashed in their fury, and at last subsided into a mysterious harmony.

This was no likeness of a thing—it was a question upon the very essence of being. As though the artist had seized the secret of creation in his brush and hurled it upon the canvas.

By the time night unfurled its dark wings and the weariness of lamps settled softly over the room, a gentle knock sounded at the door. The artist, host of the evening, opened it to find three figures standing there—and among them, frail, diminished, yet carrying a sovereign dignity, stood a man with dark glasses over his eyes and a trembling stick in his hand. His steps were guided by the others, but his face bore a radiance as if lit by the lamps of the past.

”This is Mr. Martin Lowry,” one of the companions introduced.

At once a hushed astonishment rippled through the air. Martin Lowry—the very same whose name once adorned every art journal in Europe, whose works fetched fortunes in auction houses, whose single stroke of the brush silenced criticism itself—had vanished suddenly from the world, leaving behind neither word nor will, only a void.

The artist’s lips quivered. “It is my great fortune… Please, come in“…

Slowly, Martin entered the gallery. A faint smile rested upon his lips, as though he had come not merely to behold art, but to taste the flavour of time itself.

He touched each painting with his hands, feeling them as one feels the pulse of a memory, and when he stood before the four central works, words poured from his lips—like a long-lost poet suddenly speaking again in a dream.

”This is not merely a face, but the lament of time itself. Each line, each wrinkle, is a silent cry carrying the weight of years. You have rendered old age with such dignity that the wrinkles stand like medals of time. This face speaks, it narrates, and if there be one who truly listens, water will not course through their veins, but tears. You have bestowed majesty upon sorrow“.

”This face is the daughter of history. Look how regally she stands, yet within her eyes is that hollow which destiny inscribed upon every woman of the court. That crown is no ornament, it is a prison. With colours you have written a tale—golden yet sad, beautiful yet wounded. As though she knows that behind adornment lies a chain. This is not painting, this is psychology“.

”This picture is like a breath—gentle, tender, yet whole. You have transformed noise into silence. The murmur within the water’s stream is like a mother’s lullaby. The branches of the tree are lifted as though in prayer. And the birds? They are the messengers of time, carrying moments upon their wings. You have made nature the mirror of man, and perhaps man the reflection of nature“.

”This is the canvas where reason halts and intuition walks. The painting questions the viewer and seeks its answer within their heart. You have set colours free as though they spoke the language of dreams. The image searches for its meaning in the mirror of the soul. This is art in its purest form—where creation becomes the creator“.

When the commentary ended, a peculiar silence descended upon the room—the kind of silence that follows a thunderous oration. Martin Lowry clasped the artist’s hand and said softly:

”There is light of the future in your fingers. Congratulations, you have carved your identity upon the wall of art“.

Then he departed slowly, and the lamps of the gallery glowed with their usual humble light—yet within that light now shimmered a reflection of greatness.

Tears glistened in the artist’s eyes, and within his heart arose a pride that was neither vanity nor comfort—only a quiet radiance settling deep within.

His night remained wakeful. When all the visitors had gone and the paintings upon the walls seemed to breathe, he sat alone in that room where Martin Lowry’s words still echoed. His voice, his commentary, his very presence drifted through his mind like fragments of a dream.

He stood before the mirror and looked at himself—an ordinary face, weary eyes, yet within them a new brightness, a spark that glowed. He whispered to himself:

”I am no longer who I was yesterday. I too now belong to those whose names are etched not upon canvas, but upon hearts“.

The next morning, he carried his works to the doors of a renowned gallery. He introduced himself, laid out his portfolio, and with unwavering confidence declared:

”Martin Lowry has praised my art“.

The gallery owner stared at him in astonishment.

”Martin Lowry? But he vanished from sight years ago. No one even knows if he still lives“.

”He was at my exhibition last night. He… he spoke at length about my paintings“.

The owner fell silent for a moment, then exhaled deeply before replying:

”Perhaps you do not know… When Martin last appeared before the world, his sight was already lost. He had gone blind. That is why he withdrew into seclusion. He cannot see anymore“.

The Gamecock

By the pond's edge, in a patch of bare earth, villagers had gathered like bees drawn to a hive. The sun had already begun its slow descent, and the heat of the day, once a tyrant, had grown weary and softened its grip. The eastern wall of the patwār-khāna stretched its shadow like a black cloak across the ground. To the north, at the crossroads, a greengrocer's cart stood burdened with the day's offerings, while across from it a grocer's shop promised all—from aspirin tablets to kerosene. The western wall of the patwār-khāna leaned against the mosque, and so this place, where shade and people mingled, became the very heart of the village's culture.

Here, the old men, after the noon and afternoon prayers, would spread their mats and pour into youthful ears the wisdom of living well. Boys played gulli-danda, striking sticks with reckless joy, until the elders silenced the game with tales of its perils, invoking the cautionary figure of Sāeen Wali Muhammad, whose eye had been lost to a flying stick.

Sāeen Wali Muhammad was no common man in the village; he bore the dignity of scars. Somewhere between fifty and sixty years of age, with a body still firm, his life carried the marks of strange passions. His right eye, lost in that childhood mishap, was a dark hollow of memory, and two fingers of his left hand, shorn by the cruel teeth of a fodder-cutter, bore witness to toil. He had married late, at forty, and God had granted him a son, Hamid—silent, watchful, a child whose eyes drank in the world with unsettling depth.

Wali's strangest passion was cockfighting. He kept two gamecocks, bred not for beauty nor crow, but for combat. This lust for battle, he claimed, he had inherited from Jhelum, that land once trampled by Alexander the Great. From that conqueror's shadow, he believed, the people had taken the fever of setting birds against birds, life against life. There, cockfights, quail fights, and partridge duels were as common as prayer.

In this village, the zeal was gentler, but still alive. And on this very evening, before dusk could lay her veil, a match was to take place between Wali Muhammad's bird and that of Ustād Manzoor.

The villagers pressed closer. Manzoor stood with his cock in hand, while Wali, still at home, was feeding almonds to his own warrior. Soon he appeared, his son by his side, and when

the wall's shadow had stretched its legs all the way to the pond, the contest began.

The two birds stood face to face, warriors clad in feathers, their eyes burning with the fire of their masters. Wali's champion, named Lāl Bādshāh, the Red King, stood taller and prouder than his foe, Manzoor's cock, Tommie. They leapt, they clashed—feathers whirring like drums of war. The Red King thrust Tommie back with the beat of his wings. Tommie, stung with shame, sprang and sought to strike both spurred feet upon the Red King's head. Had he succeeded, an eye might have been lost, as once Wali's own had been. The villagers roared; the masters cried their cocks' names, as if their shouts could weave courage into feathers.

Then, a cry split the air: "The Subedar has come! And he brings the radio!"

The birds were forgotten, battle abandoned. All eyes turned to the Subedar, once a soldier of the British army, now living on his pension in a nearby town. His visits were feasts for the village, for he carried with him two treasures: tales of war and the magic box that sang and spoke—the radio.

He sat upon the mat, exchanged greetings, and soon, at the people's urging, switched on the radio. Voices and songs filled the air, and until evening the villagers listened as though the very stars had begun to speak.

That night, at supper, Hamid asked his father, “Abba, why do you make the cocks fight?”

“It is my passion, son,” Wali replied simply.

“But fighting is not good. You yourself say so.”

“Aye, but cocks are not men.”

“Yet when they peck and spur one another, do they not feel pain?”

“Pain? Yes, but not as men do. They are creatures, and their hurt is little.” Wali’s voice was unsure.

Hamid ate in silence, then asked, “Are cocks enemies?”

“No, son. They know nothing of enmity.”

“Then why do they fight?”

“They fight for their masters,” Wali said. “We feed them almonds, keep them clean, and so they battle in our honour.”

But Hamid was not convinced. That night his sleep was haunted by visions of cock armies—endless rows of birds clashing like soldiers in fields of dust. He saw himself and his friend Nawab commanding these armies, urging them on, proud of their pain. The dream twisted—the cot in his yard turned to a radio, and its voice proclaimed the victories of his cocks. Manzoor and Nawab entered, clad in military uniform,

promising another match, while the cocks themselves began to speak: “Tomorrow we fight the Subedar!” Their voices became real, and Hamid awoke to the cries of his father’s birds.

He went to their cage, took one in his hands, and stared. Why did it fight? For almonds? For the love of a master? Could it be flung against any cock, friend or stranger, and forced to draw blood? His mind was a storm of unanswered questions.

The next day, instead of a cockfight, the Subedar was asked to recount a tale of battle.

He spoke of Burma, of the jungle war, when the British had dragged villagers into soldiering. “They armed us with bayonets,” he said, “and set us against the Japanese. We were no soldiers; we were beasts of burden, carrying food for the army.

At once a troop of locals attack us, they were armed with long sticks but there spirits were strong. Our commander ordered climbed up a tree and asked us to fight with them. At the tree he cried: ‘These are your enemies—strike them down! Kill, and you shall have money and wine!’ And so, like cocks at their masters’ bidding, we struck and stabbed, not knowing why, only that our masters had willed it so.”

Hamid listened, and the dream returned. The Subedar’s words blurred into the cries of cocks in the ring. The soldier’s

nose seemed hooked like Tommie’s beak, his hair a comb upon his head, his gestures the flapping of wings.

Suddenly, news came—a child had fallen from a roof. The tale was left unfinished; the Subedar departed with the crowd to tend the wounded.

That night, Hamid whispered to his father: “Abba, does not the Subedar’s face resemble Ustād Manzoor’s cock?”

Wali scolded him gently: “Never say such a thing. A man is not an animal.”

But Hamid, in the silence of his heart, could not see the difference.

The Burden

The shrine lay some four miles from here. For a man in the prime of middle age, sturdy of limb and broad of chest, such a distance might not seem daunting. Yet the path was an upward one, and upon his shoulders he was to bear his mother.

From her dwelling to this point, nine miles had already slipped past beneath the wheels of a closed carriage; he had hardly noticed their passing. But now, to the shrine, neither carriage nor beast could tread. The mother was not so frail that she could not walk; yet it was her heart's desire that her son carry her on his shoulders to the holy resting place.

The path twisted and climbed steeply. Pilgrims, with their own hands, had hacked stone into the rough shape of stairs, easing a little the labour of the feet. Here and there, boulders had been smoothed into seats where the breathless could rest, measure their progress, and reckon how far remained.

He lifted his mother onto his shoulders and began. At first the road was gentle, neither winding nor steep. This part most travellers took with cheer. Around them spread soft grass, flowers nodding in the breeze, thickets and towering trees

that stretched out their shadows like cool hands. From here the road beyond was hidden, so that one might fancy the whole journey would be as pleasant and easy.

They reached a resting place, though weariness had not yet touched him. At his mother's bidding, he set her down on a clean patch and sat himself upon the grass. Their faces turned to the road behind. She gazed at the fallen trunk of a tree nearby, while he closed his eyes and drifted backwards in thought.

His father had been poor, and ill-starred to wed a fair, youthful girl who never gave her heart to him. Even the child's arrival had not sweetened their union. He, still small, knew nothing of such matters. To him, both parents were love itself, sheltering him, striving—though with promises more than possessions—to keep joy in his days.

His mother drew him back by the arm, and once more they set forth. Now the way grew harsher. To one side rose grassy knolls, to the other a dangerous slope. Ahead, the path bent leftward: a mountain wall rose, clothed in shrubs, flowering vines and cedars, while to the right yawned a deep gorge. He tried not to look upon it, nor let it enter his thoughts.

After a long climb they reached another ledge. This time his mother gave no word of pause; borne upon his shoulders, she did not mark his weariness. He, however, chose to rest, and

seated her once more. Closing his eyes, he slipped again into memory.

His mother had escaped his father's poverty. The man was no saint, yet was he truly wicked? He asked himself: is any man wholly evil? Or wholly good? To us, a man is good only if he acts as we would, thinks as we think, holds our creed as his own. His father had not met his mother's measure of "goodness"—so she left him, and with him, her child. She chose another, less bad perhaps, better perhaps, but not good enough to remember the son she abandoned.

Opening his eyes, he saw her leaning upon a rock, far away in thought. Gently he asked, "Why did you do it? You were good. Had he also been good, your patience would have cost you nothing. True virtue would have been to endure the man you disliked, to live with what pained you. Then, mother, you would have been truly good. But now—now you are not!"

As he spoke, his voice rose, louder and louder, until it seemed even his father, buried miles away, might hear it in his grave. The trees, the insects, the very rocks trembled with the sound. His veins stood out like cords, his eyes burned crimson, and every atom around seemed to shrink in fear. His mother opened her eyes, and from them fell a cool, quenching rain of motherhood that calmed the storm. In an instant, all was still again.

The path ahead was perilous. The cliff rose sheer to one side and on the other plunged into a dry ravine. Steps cut in stone offered both hope and hazard—tread carefully, and they bore you up; stumble, and they cast you down. From here the shrine was visible, perched upon the height.

Step by trembling step, he bore her upward. His legs quivered, his shoulders groaned beneath the weight, and yet love steeled him. At last, another resting place, they lay upon stone slabs, half-reclining, breathing the mountain air.

In his childhood, his father had borne his wound in silence, never cursing the wife who left him. He used to say: “To part from the disliked, even by bitter means, is goodness enough.” Yet the boy had felt the absence keenly. School divided his mind into chambers: in one, the father who tried, and failed, to play the mother’s part; in another, the shadowy mother—like a reflection on water, which shatters when grasped; like a shadow on the ground, which flees when pursued, but clings when ignored. In other chambers were his friends’ questioning eyes, his teachers who weighed children by their parents’ worth, and the women of the neighbourhood who asked, “Do you miss your mother?”

Now, upon the height, hunger assailed them. He thought to eat after the pilgrimage, but she insisted, for she could not bear her son’s hunger. “For parents,” she said, “even when

their children are grey, they are never more than three years old."

He answered softly, "Hunger is not only of the belly. Did you ever see the hunger of my mind? Of my soul? Of my dignity? You stole my self-respect, my freedom. Though strong in body, I was weak before all. Though bright in study, I hid in the back row. I lived in inferiority—and all because of you, mother. Because of you. You trampled the paradise beneath your feet. Why? Why did you do it?"

His hands shook, his eyes burned, his ears rang with the voices of pity and scorn he had borne through the years. The voices rose, filled the air, beat upon the rocks, until it seemed the very stones mocked him.

Then his mother commanded: "Let us go." And all was stilled. He bore her onward.

At last they entered the shrine's courtyard. Here once a saint had prayed, until he vanished—some said into the earth, others into heaven, borne away by beings in white. Devotees had raised a tomb, and now a vast sanctuary. She prayed long with closed eyes, while he sat watching the path by which they had come.

When she had done, they turned back. Her wish fulfilled, her heart was light. He hoisted her once more, and set his steps toward the descent.

Yet as he walked, it seemed her weight grew heavier. His legs trembled, his shoulders staggered. The air thickened, his veins throbbed, his vision reddened. Each step crushed him deeper, until it felt his body would burst beneath the burden.

And then—he screamed. With one motion he hurled the burden from his shoulders into the abyss.

The body grew weightless, the mind as light as air. And he wept—howled like a child, tears breaking from the dam of years.

The Fugitive

The subjects of every species had chosen their representatives and sent them to the king's court. For today, they had been summoned to deliberate upon a grave matter. It had long been observed that creatures of the realm were vanishing. The subjects grew fewer, the forest thinned, and desolation stretched like a widow's shroud across the land.

The king desired an inquiry: where were their companions going, and why? Not long ago, the Woodcutter had brought tidings of a strange country, far beyond their borders. There dwelt beings who walked upon their hind legs and bore themselves upright, as though defying the earth itself. Their bodies came in shifting colours, for they could alter the hue of their skin as clouds alter the face of the sky. Their customs and diet were unlike any known. Their homes were artificial caverns, raised above the ground, lofty chambers where nature had no hand.

The news spread like fire through dry grass. Could it be that the lost ones had been drawn to this uncanny land? A council was held: a band of clever, swift emissaries would go, spy out

the place, and bring word back. Yet none returned. They too were swallowed by silence.

Thus again the royal summons went forth: each species must send one representative to court, that a remedy might be found.

The Woodcutter came once more, carrying a tale sharp as his axe. “Our lost ones,” said he, “have crossed into that land. There they shed their own forms and take on the likeness of its people. Those we sent as spies have become as the dwellers there—walking upright, eating and living in their fashion, changing their skin with them. So mingled are they that even their kin could scarce recognise them.”

At this uproar, the king craned his long neck from his chamber and commanded a full account. When all was told, he turned to his aged minister, who sat within the hollow of a tree, eyes shut, deep in thought. Summoned, the old one hooted thrice, and came solemnly to the centre of the court.

After hearing, he mused with half-closed eyes: “Assuredly they must be brought back. Yet how shall they be known, having donned alien forms, alien colours, alien ways?”

The king lifted his gaze towards the rafters, where the dark wardens—the owls—kept watch. At his command they circled the hall, and one descended to the throne. Facing the king, it spake: “Sire, though they have altered shape and

outward guise, their nature is unchanged. Send forth the minister, who shall discern them by their traits. Let him go with the secret forces, shadows woven of night, who will cast unseen nets and drag the runaways home.”

So the minister set forth with the hidden host.

They came upon a group of beings, seated with polished manners, discoursing on some grave theme. At first they smiled lightly, exchanging words like blossoms on the breeze. Yet soon the smiles waned, their faces hardened, their voices grew heated. Politeness withered; they shouted over one another, twisting in their seats. Then one leapt and seized another by the throat-skin; the second tore at the white pelt of his adversary’s head. The rest, fired with frenzy, joined in, rending and clawing. From their throats poured harsh, meaningless cries.

The minister knew them at once: these were the fugitives. He signalled, and the shadowy forces closed about their minds. Their cries deepened to growls, jaws stretched till the gums reached the ears, teeth bared like knives, backs hunched, coloured hides peeled away. Hair bristled thick upon their bodies, forelimbs struck earth, tails sprouted, and they stood revealed in their original forms. Nets fell, and the owls bore them off.

The company pressed on to a mighty cavern with many chambers barred by planks. Slipping through a crevice, the unseen forces found five beasts within. Four bore a similar guise, the fifth was unlike—its coat mottled in many hues, its fleece long. The short-haired ones drew near, rubbing the long-haired one's body with forepaws. Soon one seized its hide and stripped it, then shed his own, clung to the other and started the act of making natural love. In turn, all four enacted the rite of their kind. The forces marvelled, for the ritual of species' continuance was being performed strangely—with one alone. Informed, the minister recognised the fugitives, and again the shadow host cast its nets. The bodies bent low, hair thickened, tails sprouted, throats lengthened to snouts. The beasts were bound and handed to the owls.

Long did the minister's party watch another band. These creatures tormented their own kind without profit, driven by envy—causing pain of body, mind, and society for no gain save malice. Here too the fugitives were unmasked. The shadows drew close; their skins yellowed green, backs hunched, bellies scraped earth, legs multiplied, tails curled upward, and venomous stings darted forth. Thus, they too were snared.

Last they beheld beings scattered in many places, each wielding some power—strength of body, of society, of politics, of wealth. Yet all shared this: they trampled the

weak. Drunk with might, they strode as though the feeble were but dust beneath their feet. Again the minister saw the truth. Nets fell. Their bodies swelled, noses drooped to the earth, backs bent, small tails twitched, and they bellowed in brutish pride. The owls bore them away.

Gradually the strange land emptied. Its lofty artificial caves stood deserted, its streets haunted by fear. Silence and ruin reigned.

Perched upon the roof of a cavern, the minister's company pondered. Where were the true dwellers of this land? Had most been none other than their own kin, disguised in alien skins? The questions hung in the air, unanswered, like bats circling in dusk.

The Insensate

Muhammad Hussain had tried two or three times to rouse Nasir, but the boy merely mumbled half-awake replies and drifted back into slumber. Now the father's patience wore thin, and the storm within him sought a place to break. And, as is often the way with gentle, courteous men, whose anger seldom bursts upon the world outside, the poor wife became the vessel of his wrath. Today, however, his vexation had roots of its own.

The first grievance: Nasir had sat late into the night at the dera, glued to the flickering spell of the television—a habit Hussain despised, both the lateness of his return and the screen's hollow glare.

The second: the boy had missed the dawn prayer, and to Hussain's mind this was a breach not merely of ritual but of discipline, a fissure in the very wall of faith.

The third: he himself would have to sit alone at the shop all day, for his young assistant lay shivering with fever.

The fourth and gravest reason: a kinsman had died, and the funeral prayer was at eleven. Duty bound him to attend, yet to do so meant shuttering the shop—a wound to business and to reputation alike.

From these causes arose a cross-grained discourse, stitched with reproaches from both the near and distant past, the way a tailor sews old scraps into new cloth. The only resolution Hussain could see was that Nasir must forgo school for the day and sit with him at the shop.

Zarina, the mother, bristled at this. She could not abide the thought of Nasir sitting behind a counter—least of all in these days. He was in the fifth class, with scholarship examinations looming two months away. Her heart bore a secret prayer: her son must not be chained to the narrow life of a shopkeeper. She dreamt of him as a master, a man of learning, cloaked in books rather than barter. Yet, to save herself from the scalding of her husband's temper, she not only woke the boy but dressed him for the shop.

Their village was called Ratta Dogran, its half belonging to the Dogar clan, the rest a mingling of landowning and landless castes. A canal—like a silver snake—slid four acres away, watering Ratta and a string of villages along its banks. Ratta was their hub, with a primary school, a union council office, and a branch of the post office. Along one bank of the canal ran a broad path for carts, lorries, and tongas; the other

bank offered only a narrow foot-track, beloved of walkers and cyclists.

Two miles from the village a metalled road ran, and five miles further, a bustling town served as the market centre for twenty-five or thirty villages. It was at the very entrance of this town, beside a petrol pump, that Hussain kept his shop. Two rooms it had: the inner stocked with groceries, the outer festooned with toys and trifles for children, their bright wrappers fluttering like flags to lure young eyes from passing vehicles.

Nasir knew the place well. He could name the price of things, haggle like a fledgling trader, and had even kept the shop along with his father until three months before, when his mother's persistence persuaded Hussain to hire a helper.

That morning father and son made their plan: cycle to the road, leave the bicycle at Foji Nabi Bakhsh's shop, then ride a bus to the petrol pump. By ten they would be at the shop; at eleven Hussain would leave for the funeral, and return after, to sit again till evening.

They set out: Hussain steering the cycle, Nasir perched behind with the bundle of food. The cold bit at their ears, and a gauzy mist blurred the horizon. Soon they reached Nabi Bakhsh's shop, a place that was less a shop than a world unto itself, with Nabi as its uncrowned monarch.

He was sixty, yet sturdy and bachelor-strong, known by his military nickname “Foji.” His creed was simple, carved upon his life: live alone, live content. Once a barber in the cantonment, now he was a jack-of-all-trades. His shop housed puncture tools, a cot, a kerosene stove with blackened teapots, a table laden with rusted radios and dusty televisions, knives for sharpening, even a sewing machine. He boasted, half in jest, that he could turn his hand to any craft—save marriage.

Hussain stowed his cycle under a sheesham tree, ordered tea, and sat upon wooden planks, letting the pale sun, blurred by mist, warm him with the promise of heat it never quite delivered.

Not far from there, near a broken stretch of road where rainwater often lingered, sat a boy of twelve or thirteen. His name was Buta. His mother was unseen, a ghost of silence; his father, called Baba Buti, haunted the graveyard, burning hemp in a haze of smoke. Buta was said to be an orphaned kinsman raised by this man, though the villagers whispered of stranger origins.

For two or three years Buta had sat at that spot, a fixture like a stone, and Hussain’s heart burned whenever his eyes fell upon him. Today, when Nasir sighed with pity at the sight, Hussain’s temper cracked. “This is cruelty!” he spat. “The boy’s years are for play and books, yet his father chains him

here to beg. Such brutes deserve punishment, who waste their own lives and eat the earnings of children." Long he muttered, while Nasir, sipping tea, cast tender glances toward Buta.

Soon Hussain and Nasir caught a tonga instead of the bus—much to the boy's delight, for he fancied the slow music of hoofbeats over the haste of wheels. Reaching the shop, they set the wares in order. Presently Hussain excused himself: he must go early, to condole with relatives before the funeral.

By midday the fog lifted, and the sun's face shone bright. Nasir carried a chair outside, sat basking, and nibbled roasted chickpeas. Just then Nazir Mughal's car drew up at the petrol pump. Nazir Sahib, a well-known, generous man, alighted with his son—also called Buta.

This Buta was a child of prayer, born fifteen years after his parents' marriage, when all hope had dried and they had resigned themselves to barrenness. A wandering fakir had promised them a son, if they vowed to name him Muhammad Buta. By that vow, the boy became their miracle.

While Nazir Sahib filled petrol, he bade his son fetch food from across the road. The boy returned, troubled, saying a small child sat behind the shop counter. At this, Nazir Sahib erupted as Hussain had earlier: "This is cruelty! The child's years are for play and study, and yet his father forces him to

keep shop. Such men are without humanity, who waste their own lives and consume the earnings of their children!”

He muttered long, while his son gazed at Nasir with the same pity Nasir had felt for the beggar boy that morning.

Honour

When Shah Ji entered the drawing room, the gathering rose like a field of wheat swaying to the command of the wind. With him came the notables of the region, men of consequence whose presence made the air heavy with unspoken reverence. His bodyguards, stern as sentinels of stone, took their places by the door, while the eyes of those present shimmered with a mixture of fear and devotion, like candles flickering in a draught yet unwilling to extinguish themselves.

Shah Ji seated himself with the majesty of a monarch lowering his crown upon a throne. Only when he allowed it did some others dare to sit, though many chose to remain standing. Their adoration forbade them from lowering themselves to his level.

Malik Mubashir, the great landlord of the village, began introducing the men of the assembly. At the end, he mentioned Jeera—the man whose mother had died, and for whose condolence Shah Ji, against the grandeur of his station, had stooped to appear.

Jeera belonged to that nameless class whose identities were stripped of dignity, shadows without true appellations. He was a hereditary servant in Malik's household, condemned to the broom and the dustpan, to the endless cleansing of filth not his own. Ordinarily, men of Malik's stature would not soil their tongues by replying to Jeera's salutations. But on this day, the dying of his mother had raised him higher than the living ever could.

In her life, she had been a voice that died within her own hut, her weak calls dissolving in silence, unheard even by the walls around her. Yet in death she was transformed. Wrapped in stainless white cloth, bathed with scented soap, adorned with petals and perfume—luxuries she had never dared to imagine—her body became a symbol of what she had been denied in life. Her passing altered not only her own fate, but bestowed upon her son a strange, fleeting eminence. Coins and donations poured into their hut, and, more than that, Jeera was suddenly treated with tenderness. Villagers softened their voices, counselled him with patience, and placed him in the centre of the funeral chamber, the axis around which all sympathies revolved.

But Kalu's heart burned. The fire of envy gnawed at him like a rat in the dark. Never before had he despised Jeera, for they had been equals—two worms from the same furrow of earth. If Jeera swept the dust of the landlord's courtyard, Kalu kept

the hookahs fresh and prepared food for the hounds. Their friendship had been simple, even tender; they exchanged tokens of kindness—tobacco for Jeera's mother, cooked food for Kalu's crippled father. But since yesterday, Kalu's heart had soured, his envy ripening into hatred. When Shah Ji himself placed his hand upon Jeera's head in consolation, Kalu's face blackened with rage. To him it was unthinkable: a titan lowering his hand upon a worm!

Shah Ji was no ordinary man. Kalu had seen his dera, a square courtyard of four acres crowned by a mansion, surrounded by lawns and plants, where in winter he held court upon a high dais, lording above men who dared not sit at his level. He was heir to a spiritual throne and commander in politics—wealth, piety, and power braided in his person like a crown of three metals. Officers, politicians, even the proudest men of rank, bent before him. Yet here he was, speaking to Jeera as if the lowly had suddenly been ennobled.

Kalu, whose name meant "dark", was ironically fair of skin and well-shaped of face—features ill-suited to his class, for beauty among worms was an affront to those who ruled. They had called him Kalu to bruise him with mockery, branding his light with darkness. And if not by visage, then by his deeds he lived up to that name. He was no stranger to drink when opportunity offered, nor to theft when a crack appeared. Yet, like the lords, he thirsted for prominence, ever straining

to stand where eyes would fall upon him, to be seen shaking hands with officers and leaders even if scolded after.

That evening, while Jeera received the sympathy of the world, Kalu's resentment hardened into eternal enmity. Outwardly he smiled, sat with Jeera, shared grief, but within him a snake coiled tighter with every breath.

As days passed, Jeera's brief crown of grief slipped away. Villagers forgot; his mother's death was now a past whisper, and he returned to the dust of his old insignificance. Yet Kalu's rancour remained as fresh as blood on a blade. Whenever his eyes fell on Jeera, the memory of his exaltation burned anew. Hatred gnawed at him until he longed to strangle Jeera, to crush his bones, to scatter him in fragments like chaff before the wind.

Then came the night of decision. His elder brother gone to a wedding, the house held only Kalu and his ailing father. After chores, he brought food from the landlord's house, fed himself and his father, and lay upon a mat when Jeera appeared with sweetmeat. They shared the halwa together, though to Kalu it tasted bitter, for envy dripped upon every bite. He conversed with Jeera in honeyed tones, masking the venom in his throat. When Jeera departed, Kalu declared he too must step out, hiding a knife beneath his waist. A plan was fermenting—a plan to carve his name upon the village's memory with blood.

He returned half an hour later, lighter of spirit, as though the burden of envy had been eased. Placing the knife beneath his mat, he turned to his sleeping father. He kissed his feet, pressed them with devotion, gazed upon his frail face, and then—lifting a pillow—pressed it upon the old man's mouth with the full weight of his body. The weak limbs shuddered, then grew still. In Kalu's mind, he was already upon the bier, receiving words of sympathy, standing radiant in the light of communal pity, the centre of attention he had always craved.

The Return

The hush of night had already mingled with the pulse of the city. Moonlight lay scattered upon the sea as though fragments of a shattered mirror were trembling on the water's breast. Kamran sat at the edge of the shore, counting the scars of a life long spent in battle.

His existence had been a ceaseless war, every dawn a new skirmish. Childhood passed in poverty, the dream of learning fettered in chains of want. In youth, he was ground in the mill of toil, yet success remained ever like a mirage upon the desert's horizon. The burden of parents, the duties of sisters, the taunts of society—all fell upon him like boulders from a merciless height.

In the carnival of this world, he was but a spectator without even the price of admission. Men spurned him, Time trampled him. At the door of every employment stood the iron wall of influence; wherever he sought honour, the snares of exploitation were spread. And when, after a day's humiliation, he lay upon his bed at night, the echoes of words meant to diminish him rang in his ears.

At last, when every lamp of courage was extinguished and the final bud of hope withered, Kamran resolved that there was no sense in remaining part of this pitiless world. If life was a prison, then escape alone was salvation.

He rose slowly. His steps were heavy, yet his heart felt strangely unburdened. At one end of the shore stood a great cliff, beneath which lay only the sea's unfathomable depth. He advanced towards it, every pace carrying him closer to an unknown liberty.

Standing at the brink, he looked down. The waters leapt restlessly, as though eager to gather a weary traveller into their bosom. His eyelids drooped, his breath grew disordered. But in that very moment, a whisper stirred the air.

"Kamran! Stay thy hand!"

Suddenly—as though the earth itself had sighed—smoke rose from the trunk of a withered tree and shaped itself into human form. The mist dispersed, and before him stood a tall, broad figure with a beard white as snow, a face veiled in dignity and tranquillity. He wore a simple robe, and his eyes held the depth of a philosopher's wisdom.

Kamran, startled, gazed upon the apparition. Wonder made him mute, and fear held his tongue captive.

The figure smiled gently.

“I am the Sage, the man whom the world crowned with wisdom, yet compelled to drain the cup of poison.”

Kamran’s voice trembled. “You… you took your own life?”

The Sage laughed softly. “Nay, my friend! My death was not my choice, yet I embraced it willingly. They punished me for truth, but I chose truth over life. And when the poison touched my lips, I drank it as a thirsty man drinks water.”

“Then why do you stand before me?” Kamran asked, bewildered.

The Sage’s smile deepened. Seating himself upon the rock, he cast his gaze over the vastness of the sea.

“I come to tell you that flight from life’s trials is cowardice. You fancy death a balm, yet it is but a mirage. I looked upon each moment through the eyes of reason; even when the doors of life were closed to me, I accepted truth, but I sought not escape.”

He peered into Kamran’s eyes, as though to reach his very soul.

“And you—would you yourself close the door upon your life? Do you truly believe that this is the cure for your pain?”

Kamran was ensnared in silence; thoughts clashed within his mind like armies in a storm.

Yet scarcely had he begun to ponder the Sage's words, when a strange fragrance floated through the air—roses and sandalwood, tinged with some invisible venom. A gentle wave struck the cliff, and within the droplets a shadowy form began to stir. Slowly, the mist moulded itself into the shape of a woman—tall, delicate yet regal, clad in silken robes edged with gold that shimmered under the moonlight. A diadem glowed upon her brow, and in her hand she bore a golden chalice, around which a serpent coiled.

"I am Queen…" Her voice was intoxicating, as though the spirit of ancient Egypt herself spoke.

Kamran stepped back instinctively. "You too… are dead?"

The Queen smiled faintly, though sorrow lurked beneath it.

"Yes, I chose my own end. When the Romans trampled my land, when the honour of my crown lay in the dust, when every door was barred, I deemed it nobler to die as a free sovereign. I let the serpent creep upon my skin, and with but one sting I was delivered from this false theatre."

Kamran drew a long breath. "And you felt no regret? To rob yourself of life's light?"

Her face grew solemn. "Regret? No, I should have regretted had I lived to fall at my enemies' feet. I purchased dignity at the price of death—and it was not a poor bargain."

She advanced, her eyes fixed upon him.

“Are you not upon the same path? Have you not lost all that was dear? Then why delay? Embrace death as I did. See how peaceful it is—no pain, no spectacle, only a silent release.”

She extended the golden cup towards him, as though urging him to press the draught of death upon his lips.

Kamran’s heart wavered like a storm-tossed ship. Was this truly the remedy? Was peace to be found in the arms of death?

But ere he could decide, the air resounded with a deep echo, as if history itself were knocking upon stone walls…

A sudden chill swept through the air, as though some unseen hand had drawn a curtain across the moon. The Queen’s shimmering figure began to blur, when out of the darkness emerged a man in imperial robes, his visage stern, his eyes blazing like torches of madness. His hands bore the stains of both music and fire, his lips curved into a smile half cruel, half sorrowful.

“I am King,” he declared, his voice a mingling of thunder and theatre. “Emperor of Rome, master of legions, lord of palaces. Men feared me, women adorned me, and yet—did I not in the end drive a blade through my own throat?”

Kamran recoiled. “You too… ended your own life?”

King laughed, a laugh like breaking glass. “Yes! And why should I not? The world that had once trembled at my nod turned its back upon me. Those who had eaten at my table sharpened their daggers for my heart. Rome itself, which I had bathed in light and fire, spat upon me as though I were a beggar in rags. When even the gods desert a man, what remains but the solace of his own sword?”

He spread his arms as if to embrace the horizon.

“Think, Kamran! Have you not felt the treachery of men? Have not those closest to you mocked your labour, laughed at your tears? Then why bear this burden? Let your own hand deliver you from this circus of hypocrisy. Believe me, death is sweeter than disgrace. Better a wound of steel than the whip of humiliation.”

His words echoed against the cliff, and Kamran’s heart trembled as though the sea itself had roared within his chest. But even as Nero’s figure darkened, another presence stirred—a frail man with a canvas beneath his arm, his face pale, his eyes pools of tortured beauty.

“I am an artist,” he whispered, the words trembling like brushstrokes in the wind. “A painter who bled colour upon canvas, yet was starved of bread. The world mocked me, called me mad, locked me in rooms where only shadows were my companions. But I loved the sky, the fields, the

stars—they were my true family. Still, the cruelty of men broke me. I pressed a gun against my chest, and silence fell."

Kamran looked at him with pity. "And yet—your art endures."

artist's lips curved into a bitter smile. "Yes, my name is sung now, but what worth is fame when the body lies rotting in a grave? Do not be deceived by their hymns; they honour the dead only because the dead cannot protest. My colours bought me no bread, no warmth, no hand to hold. Learn from me: if life gives you naught but thorns, crush them in your fist and let blood be your final paint."

The sea seemed to sigh in agreement, and Kamran's heart again leaned towards the abyss.

But just then, the silence was torn by marching boots, a shadow fell like iron upon the cliff, and before him stood a figure with a rigid moustache, his eyes sharp as bayonets, his arm raised in a salute that once commanded millions.

"I am Prusian," he thundered, "builder of empires, breaker of chains. I raised a nation from ashes, bent the world to my will. Yet when the tides of war turned, when my fortress crumbled, I too chose the bullet rather than bow my head to the victors."

His voice rang with steel.

“Kamran! This world is war. Weakness is crushed, strength alone is worshipped. If you cannot triumph, at least die with defiance. Death, when chosen by one’s own hand, is not defeat—it is the last throne of power. Do not grovel like a slave. Leap into eternity as a master!”

The cliff trembled beneath Kamran’s feet; his breath came quick, his veins burned. Death, once dreadful, now seemed robed in majesty.

And yet, before he could step, a faint murmur stirred behind him—a voice soft as the flutter of a bird, yet carrying the sorrow of centuries. A woman appeared, pale, delicate, her hair undone like a river of night. In her hands was a manuscript, damp with tears.

“I am poetess,” she murmured. “A poetess whose words dripped with the anguish of existence. The world praised my lines, but gave me no companion for my soul. In despair, I laid my head within the oven, and let the flames carry me away.”

Her eyes, hollow yet tender, fixed upon Kamran.

“Do you too bleed words within, Kamran? Do you too find the world deaf to your cries? Then come, join us. Death is not an end—it is a fellowship, a silent brotherhood of the weary. See how many of us are gathered here? You shall not be alone.”

Her whisper faded into the salt wind. The sea roared like a hungry beast. The cliff beneath Kamran’s feet seemed to draw him closer.

The Cure

This tale belongs to an age unbound by the wheel of time—neither past, nor present, nor future, but a moment that seemed to have spilled from eternity's chalice into the lap of infinity. There, the sun did not rise from the horizon, but dawned within the eyes of the beholder. Moonlight did not descend from the heavens, but flowed gently from the courtyard of the royal palace.

This kingdom was nowhere to be found on a map, nor did history's chronicles whisper of it. Yet, its echo resounded faintly in the heartbeat of a dreamer, in the shadow of an ancient prayer, in the glimmer of a forgotten vision.

The royal palace, crown of that unseen realm, was built of rubies, sapphires, and emeralds. Its walls were so transparent they seemed mirrors imprisoning time itself; its ceilings brushed the stars. Verses engraved upon its pillars resembled the supplications of mystics, each word stirring tremors deep within the heart.

Beyond its gates flowed the rivers of the Water of Life; within, instruments played that measured not hours but destinies—melodies that halted the past and suspended the future.

The court at its centre was a dream materialised. Its marble columns bore golden inscriptions, as though the scribe of fate had etched destinies with his own hand. Each evening, when the Emperor—"the Shadow of the Almighty"—ascended his throne, a fragrance spread through the court, like secrets of bygone ages dissolving into scent.

The Emperor's eyes carried the stillness of the horizon, and upon his brow rested the very forehead of history. At his command, autumn blossomed into spring; at his silence, rivers withered into deserts.

The princesses bore the delicacy of dewdrops, the princes the fleeting brilliance of lightning. Though their robes gleamed with gold, their grace was cloaked in a saintly simplicity. Courtiers, paragons of wisdom and courtesy, spoke with such refinement that words seemed to bow before leaving their lips. Each counsel was like the opening of a rare tome.

Speech had its etiquettes, sight its bounds, even silence its rhythm. Every breath rose like a supplication, every step led toward a mystery. All things seemed alive, moving to some hidden music of destiny. When bells tolled, time itself froze;

when candles by the river were lit, it felt as though fate unveiled its face.

But one day, the treasurer whispered that the young prince had not graced the court for many days. At once, the air grew tense—as though an unseen calamity had crept in on muffled feet. Curtains trembled without wind; pigeons, who once sang ghazals from the arches, fell mute.

The prince—famed not only for the radiance of his visage but the brilliance of his mind—had taken to bed. His body waned daily, his eyes dimmed, and the lustre of his face withered. The royal physician examined his pulse, his gaze, the sluggish passage of time through his veins—yet no diagnosis bore a name.

First came the court's physicians, then the sages, then mystics—each lit the lantern of his knowledge, but the darkness deepened still. Lines of worry gathered upon the Emperor's brow like storm clouds on a restless sky. Unease crept through the palace, whispering of despair.

At last, the elder counsellor rose and said:

"Sovereign of the Age, when the remedies of earth avail not, let the caskets of time be opened. Summon the healers of yesterday and the physicians of tomorrow. For this affliction lies beyond the grasp of ordinary wisdom."

The Emperor nodded, and ordered the instruments of time to be played. A chill fell upon the air, as though time itself had drawn breath and held it, awaiting the arrival of an unseen moment. And lo—out of the southern corridor appeared a wandering dervish…

\[The tale continues with the parade of healers: the mystic with his sacred oils, the herbalist with his fragrant roots, the neurologist with his cryptic codes of C7, T12, and L5, the Chinese sage with his needles of silver and whispers of chi, the occultist with his talismans and incantations, the futurist physician with his luminous machines and nano-bots, and finally the masseur whose hands prayed silently upon the prince's body. Yet none prevailed. For the malady was not of the body, nor the bones, nor the nerves, but of the heart—its rhythm tethered to a hidden presence.]

And then—after all wisdoms had exhausted themselves—came the maidservant. She bore no relics, no instruments, no scrolls of knowledge. Only the fragrance of olive oil upon her hands, the hush of patience in her breath, and the tenderness of devotion in her gaze.

She tended to him with gentleness—watched his sleep, guarded his meals, surrounded his rest with peace. Slowly, like the parched earth trembling at the kiss of first rain, life began to stir within him again. His eyes regained their brightness, his body its vigour, his spirit its calm.

The palace, once cloaked in gloom, now glowed with quiet joy. Courtiers marvelled at the prince's recovery; the Emperor himself proclaimed a grand festival. Yet amidst all the music and laughter, one question lingered like a whisper of wind through forgotten halls:

"How did the prince heal so swiftly?"

The prince smiled softly and said:

"It was by the grace of one who has always been near."

And though the courtiers marvelled, and the Emperor rejoiced, only the maidservant and the prince knew the secret—that the cure was not in herbs, nor in charms, nor in machines, but in care, in presence, in love unspoken.

Torment

This was no ordinary city, but a realm liberated from the shackles of time and space, poised upon the frontier of dream and imagination. Not upon the lap of earth, but suspended in the swaying orbits of the heavens, it stood—an abode fashioned by mankind through millennia of science, thought, and the ashes of desolate pasts. Here, no sun rose, no night descended; light and darkness had been bent to the will of man.

It was called Niranova. Towers soared to caress the bent breast of the sky, yet their walls were not of glass but woven from pure light. There were no streets, but floating causeways that rippled through the void, upon which no car moved, no bird flew, but crystalline clusters, borne on currents of energy, carried souls from one place to another. Feet no longer kissed the earth; man was tethered not to nature but to the laws of his own invention.

Every citizen was shadowed by a silvered holo-double, a guardian that recorded thoughts, watched over health, and mapped emotion. Illness was no longer diagnosed by hand but by machines; moods were cured with fragrances, colours,

and waves. Food was not cooked for taste, but designed in genetic patterns, and consumed through a single “point of energy.”

Each home was an island of light suspended in space, bound to its dwellers by their very identities. The walls themselves bore emotion: they darkened at sorrow, they gleamed at joy. These houses were not mute matter but living spirits, each aglow with the fire of scientific consciousness.

Time here was but a blurred hour, neither felt in its passing nor counted in anticipation. Man had conquered death, yet within him survived the old impulses—love, fear, yearning, desire, and above all… pain.

For all its brilliance, this city was voiceless. Noise had become algorithmic music, and silence—silence was the abyss lodged deep within the heart, a void no invention could ever fill.

And in this city, at the farthest rim of space, within a dome of light, a man dwelt with his little daughter—outwardly complete, yet inwardly broken.

He was known to Niranova as Ulfat Zadeh. In this radiant constellation of humanity, he himself was an island: luminous without, dark within. His true name had long since vanished, sealed with the old tongues, memories, and civilisations, now archived in the library of time.

The ceiling of his home shimmered like a restless galaxy, shifting hues at every moment. The walls breathed perfume, the floor sang beneath each step. To the casual eye, this was a man at the summit of existence. Yet life is not measured by luxuries alone, but by the touch that holds a tiny hand, stopping time itself.

That touch came to him only through one being—his ten-year-old daughter, Arsha.

Arsha—her name like the fragrance of springtime blossoms, her eyes radiant as starlight, her laughter a rebellion against the silence of space. Her hair flowed like silver rain; in her gait danced the mischief once told of in fairy-tales of earth.

Each morning she painted their home's "emotional air" with joy. Her words made the walls smile; her laughter made the ceiling's stars sway. At times she would gaze upon the artificial sky and whisper, "Father, I wish this were all a dream, and we were sitting beneath a tree listening to a story." He would only smile.

Ulfat Zadeh—once a master geneticist—had since abandoned the universe to revolve only around his daughter. Her mother had vanished years before in a scientific experiment, perhaps obliterated. Since that day, the man who could reshape the fabric of space had become only a father. He renounced his

profession, surrendered ambition, and devoted himself to Arsha.

Each day was a rebirth. He conjured enchanted tales for her, set an artificial moon upon her dreams, prepared swings of light for her mornings. Together they explored the pictorial libraries of old civilisations. Arsha was fascinated: “Did people truly plant trees, Father?” she would ask. He sighed: “Yes, daughter. And sometimes… they planted dreams as well.”

Within Arsha lay something untouched by her artificial age—her laughter held the echoes of the old earth, her questions the innocence time had long forgotten. Perhaps this was why her father clung to her so desperately; she was not merely his child, but the final reflection of his soul.

And that reflection gave him life each day.

But then came the day when silence fell heavier than space itself.

Arsha’s laughter dulled. Her bright eyes filled with a strange mist, as though some distant galaxy were crumbling in sorrow. At first, it was thought to be fatigue. Perhaps a restless night, perhaps a hidden sadness. But when her fragile hands began to tremble, her steps grew heavy, and silence replaced her laughter, Ulfat Zadeh felt the first wound cut deep.

Machines whirred; scanners glowed; DNA readers hummed. In Niranova's greatest Bio-Sanctum, her body was mapped entire. Then upon the screen, words appeared—like death itself, for the first time, taking written form:

"Cell Degeneration Syndrome: Final Stage. Estimated life expectancy—three to four months. Severe pain, neural collapse, systemic decay."

The world reeled before his eyes. His little star was fading. Each day promised to bring her torment: blackening skin, muscles shrivelling, bones aching, nerves burning like fire, until nothing remained but helplessness.

He begged for the "time-shattering drugs" whispered of by physicians. But their eyes held only silence—the silence of falling stars.

From that day on, every breath of Arsha's was a dagger in his chest.

At times, her small voice would ask, "Father, I will be well soon, won't I?"

And he would laugh: "Of course, my princess! Soon we shall build a new planet."

But inside, he died each day.

At night he sat by her door, staring into the void, asking himself: “Can I bear to see her writhe? Or… is there another path I must take?”

That night, the very sky of Niranova fell mute. Stars shut their eyes, the moon turned its face, and time itself seemed to stop its pulse.

Within the prison of his thoughts sat Ulfat Zadeh. On the throne of light sat Reason, stern and sharp; in the shadowed corner stood Love, bleeding and weary.

“What will you do?” Reason asked, eyes cold as steel.

“I want to save her,” Love whispered, frail yet fierce.

“Save? Is this salvation—or the end of love?” Reason mocked.

“When life itself becomes torment, when every breath is poison, each moment a spark of fire—what mercy is greater than release?” Love answered.

Reason’s voice was glacial: “Are you God, to decree life and death?”

“I am only a father,” Love lowered his eyes, “who cannot watch his daughter burn in agony.”

“And if she wakes? If her final smile is stolen by your hand?” Reason thundered.

Love fell silent. Then quietly: “Have you heard her whimper in sleep? Felt the pain hidden behind her laughter?”

“You know I understand—” Reason began.

“You understand, but you do not feel,” Love cut him short. “You have never walked the forests of the heart. You sit only in the hut of the mind, scribbling verdicts.”

For a moment, moisture trembled in Reason’s eyes—but he wiped it swiftly away.

“So you call this justice? What of her will, her hope, her dream?”

“Dream?” Love gave a broken laugh. “Her dream is me. Her last prayer is to die in my arms.”

“You are selfish. You fear not her pain, but her absence.” Reason’s words struck like lightning.

“Yes!” Love cried. “I am selfish! Has love ever been without condition? Does a father live only to give? No—I live shattered, broken, undone!”

Silence reigned. Then Reason spoke softly: “Go then, decide. But remember—your conscience will echo this night for all eternity.”

Love rose, walked slowly toward the door. Light dimmed, as though even conscience recoiled into shadow.

He entered. Moonlight spilled faintly, as if a dream had dropped its veil. In the corner lay Arsha, upon a glass bed, breathing smiles in her sleep. In her tiny palms fluttered dreams of butterflies, upon her lashes trembled a prayer.

He approached, hesitant, as though the ground itself resisted his steps. He stroked her hair, as though touching a sacred scripture. She stirred, a smile flickered—"Baba…" she murmured in sleep.

His heart shook. Yet he was silent. Time froze.

Slowly, he lifted the pillow. His hands trembled—as if fate itself bowed, begging him to stop. The pillow descended, softly, gently, upon her face.

Moments… only moments. Then silence.

He removed the pillow. Her face was serene, as though a fairy had surrendered her life within a dream.

He staggered back, eyes hollow, tongue mute, heart a graveyard of stillness. Then suddenly—a scream. A scream that shattered the ceiling, tore through the walls, and reached the heavens.

He screamed until his voice broke, and fell unconscious.

The Living Character

When the sun poured gold from its rising chalice, and moonlight wove dreams into the folds of its silver veil—

There existed an age hidden in the brittle leaves of ancient tomes, or whispered faintly from the half-dreaming eyes of elders.

At the edge of a forgotten world, where dense forests clasped hands with crystal rivers, there lay a village. It appeared on no map, lingered in no traveller's memory. It lived only in the hearts of those who prized dreams more dearly than waking.

Its houses were not built of clay or timber, but of raw light and fragrant mist. Vines curled over every doorway, murmuring tales of joy and sorrow. The streets were not paved with stones, but with silvery threads, soft as dew; and upon them, each step awakened tiny bells beneath one's feet.

The air carried the perfume of tuberose, drifting endlessly. Birds, feathered in a rainbow of colours, conversed in laughter, and at times, sang stories never spoken before. At dusk, when the sun surrendered to slumber, the village

drowned in a sapphire haze, and fireflies hung from the branches like golden ornaments—

as though the sky had unfastened its star-strewn mantle and let it fall upon the trees.

Beyond the river rose a hill where, now and then, a golden deer appeared, telling wordless stories through its eyes. And when rain fell, the ponds did not bloom with lotuses—dreams blossomed instead.

The village seemed small in appearance, yet its mysteries stretched without end. Time itself halted here; and stories, like living beings, drew breath. It felt as though some ancient sorcerer had strung this village upon the thread between dream and reality.

At one edge of this dream-bound hamlet, beneath the shade of a sprawling banyan tree, stood a hut. Yet it was no ordinary hut: its walls were woven of fragrance, its roof studded with beads of dew. There dwelt the storyteller, known to the people as “The Wizard of Tales.” His name was Arsal Khaleeq.

His eyes resembled deep wells, their waters rippling with the shadows of hidden secrets. His beard gleamed white as moonlight, and autumn’s breath lingered in his hair. His gait was like an old whisper setting foot upon the earth, and his voice—each word a spell unfurling into the air.

His habits were as strange as his stories. At dawn he rose with the fresh-breathing wind, sat by a stream, and drank the smile of the sunrise. Then he returned to his hut and began weaving tales. There were no pens upon his desk; instead, delicate transparent birds perched there, and from their feathers he carved his words.

He did not write with ink but with air; and when his writings were complete, they fell as blossoms upon the earth. His stories were no mere fables—they were worlds where desires took form and thoughts grew wings.

Such was his art—

He shaped fragrance into form, gave voice to shadows, spun stories out of wind, and sculpted characters from mist.

Often, he stole tales from the creatures of his village—snatching a legend from the gaze of the golden deer, writing a dream in the glow of a firefly.

His garments belonged to no worldly tailor: a delicate white robe embroidered with stars of indigo. He wore no shoes, for he believed the earth's stories could only be heard with bare feet.

People came from afar to see him, but he rarely spoke. He often said:

“The greatest devotion of a storyteller is silence, so that words may journey of their own accord.”

Thus, in solitude, he cultivated a magical garden of stories, each tale scattering into the air like butterflies.

One evening, when the sky was awash in blue and gold at sunset, the storyteller wrote a strange tale: “The Fairy with Sapphire Eyes.”

When it was finished, he stepped outside, listening to the rustle of trees. Suddenly—a faint laugh shimmered, like music strummed upon the air.

He turned, and there she stood—

a tiny fairy with sapphire eyes, her gown glittering with dewdrops like pearls.

The very vision he had just written!

At first, he thought it a dream’s aftertaste. But when the fairy bowed and greeted him, a shiver coursed through his body.

Days later, another marvel occurred.

He had written “The Brave One with the Shining Sword”, protector of the village from unseen perils. And one morning the children rushed to him, crying:

“O elder! A sword-bearer chased away the robbers last night!”

And when he went to see, there stood a young warrior, sword gleaming in the sun—exactly as he had crafted him in words.

A third time, he penned “The Queen of Weeping Clouds,” whose tears rained upon the earth. Soon, a gentle rain fell, so delicate that flowers bloomed within it and the soil released its fragrance. People swore they saw, within the clouds, the silhouette of a woman, head bowed, weeping.

This uncanny chain of events stirred unease in his heart.

Was it mere coincidence? Or had his creations truly awakened into life?

Each new tale seemed to draw breath; each character and scene he wrote stepped forth into the valley. At night he lay sleepless, and when the enchanted lamp in his hut flickered, it seemed as though words danced from the walls into the air.

At last, the evidence was undeniable. He could no longer doubt: his pen had awakened a power—the power to give life.

Yet with that wonder came a whisper in his heart:

“If I can create others… why not myself?”

The thought struck him like lightning.

On a moonlit night, when the valley bathed in milk-white glow and the cedars hummed an ancient hymn, he sat by his lamp, restless. Spirals of smoke curled towards the heavens, and within him the whisper echoed:

“If I can grant life to others… why not to myself?”

It surged through him like long-slumbering desires awakened.

He thought:

“If I fashion a character, one apart from me yet still my reflection,

I shall live forever.

I shall write endless stories.

Neither time nor death will touch me.”

A plan blossomed in his mind:

He would create a character who himself was a storyteller—

and that character would create another,

and so the chain would continue from eternity to eternity—

an endless life, born from the womb of stories.

By the lamp's glow he drew out an old pen and inkwell. In a moment touched by sorcery, his hand moved of its own accord. He began to write:

"There was once a rustic storyteller. His name was Arsal Khaleeq… The shadows of his imagination turned into reality. One day he wished to cast himself into a tale, so that time's tyranny would never touch him…"

With each sentence, he poured himself upon the page.

With every line, he grew lighter, as though flesh and bone dissolved into words.

When the story ended, the lamp flared,

winds roared through the hut,

darkness swallowed all—then light returned.

And in that light sat two children.

One held an old book in his hands.

"I've finished reading this," he said. "Such delightful tales! Especially the character of Arsal Khaleeq—I loved him most. Do you think such a man truly lived in the past?"

The other laughed softly:

"Oh no… he was but a character. In truth, no such man ever existed."

The Masterpiece

It was in those days when the radiant Empire's sun knew no setting, and its glory shimmered upon the world's horizon like an eternal parable. The snows of Mount Diamond were set in the bangles of emperors, and upon the banks of the River Herman encamped armies dreamt of victories yet unborn.

Roshan — whom Time had crowned and History had chiselled as if from marble — scattered hymns of gods across his dominions, where gardens bloomed in the hues of rainbows, arches were gilded with veins of gold, and bazaars breathed fragrances as if woven from jasmine and musk. Its streets were verses of some legendary ode, and its turrets peering from the ramparts stood as symbols of philosophers' soaring thoughts.

When musicians struck their strings and the notes struck marble halls, even the winds took to humming. Sculptors seemed to carve the very dreams of gods into stone, and poets — their metaphors still reverberated centuries later, echoing like voices carried in caverns of time.

In that realm — where every artist stood as a herald of Nature and every alley hid a secret — there lived an artist known as the Painter of Souls.

This man, so named, was no ordinary craftsman. In his eyes lay the depth of lakes, on his brow the tides of seas, and in his stature the loftiness of imagined mountains. He seemed as though moulded from divine clay, save that his strength lay not in sinew but in vision.

His hair hung long, like dew trembling on cypress branches at dawn, and his hands — oh, those hands — stood like the pillars of an ancient temple bathed in moonlight: soft, solemn, yet resolute. When his brush drew its first stroke upon canvas, Time itself faltered, and a dreamlike hush stole over the air.

The fame of his creations journeyed far beyond the colonnades of Roshan to distant shores. Yet the marvel lay not merely in his portraits, but in his power to conjure lives upon canvas.

His works were not mere paintings but symbols — beyond time, beyond being. People said his colours spoke in the tongue of life itself, and his lines seemed as inscriptions of destiny. Yet he himself remained silent, conversing only with his eyes.

He once said:

"I do not paint portraits; I open windows in the fabric of Time."

Now he yearned for a new creation — a painting in which not only Time but Life itself would be ensnared. A masterpiece.

One evening, as the sun melted into crimson flames upon Rome's marble bastions and the air rustled with whispers of sapphire twilight, the artist entered his chamber and stood before the canvas with closed eyes.

This was no ordinary undertaking.

He resolved to paint what was yet unborn — a moment a century distant.

His fingers trembled as though he had plucked some hidden string of history. Days bled into weeks, weeks into months. He drew his curtains, barred his doors, and drowned himself in colours, shadows, and forms. This was no portrait of a family, but the tale of Time itself.

Upon his canvas appeared a father — weariness of the age upon his brow, yet hope for tomorrow alight in his eyes. A mother, in whose embrace lay oceans of sacrifice. Two sons — one lofty in vision, the other quiet but awake. And a daughter too, who dared to gaze into the eyes of the future.

They stood before a great edifice, as though a gallery or museum, engaged in earnest discourse over some work of art unseen to us.

As he painted their faces, the artist would pause: “Are these wrought by my hand? Or sprung from some secret of my soul?”

Until the work was done, a fine sheen of light dwelt upon his countenance — as though he were losing something, or perhaps gaining more than he knew.

At last the painting was finished. He stood in the centre of the room before it, still, composed, no longer a mere painter but a sentinel at the threshold of the unseen.

His gaze fell into the painting’s hidden depths of futurity — yet he did not perceive that the painting, too, had begun to gaze upon him.

A strange hush lay over the chamber — the hush that lingers before the first fall of snow, or the creak of some ancient door opening at last.

He stepped back and studied his creation. It was beautiful, perhaps the truest of all his works.

Then — suddenly —

something shifted.

At first he could not fathom it. But as moments passed, the eyes within the canvas grew deeper, more alive.

There were no longer colours alone — there was light.

No longer faces alone — there were souls.

Then an eyelid fluttered.

The artist drew breath sharply.

Another blink. Then another. Then all!

“What… what is happening?” he whispered, but his own voice felt distant, as though estranged from him.

The figures began to stir their lips.

Then came a faint murmur —

“This is strange…”

They were no longer merely moving — they were speaking.

“This painter is most peculiar — such realism!” came the voice of a youth.

“Yes, as though this were painted with the very heart,” murmured a woman.

“But whose picture is this?” asked the youngest boy.

And then — they all turned.

Turned to gaze upon another painting —

A portrait of an imagined prince, upon whose visage a strange exaltation rested. His long hair trembled like dew upon cypress branches, his hands stood like temple pillars drenched in moonlight, his eyes held the depth of lakes, his stature the loftiness of mountains of imagination. He seemed sculpted from the very clay of gods.

And the gathered family, awed, stood in wonder before the prince’s portrait.

The Question

In a half-worn lane of a small Punjabi town stood a half-built house, in whose courtyard an old jamun tree kept silent vigil, as though cradling the dust of passing years upon its bark. In that house lived Qurban Khan — an unassuming government servant, a minor officer in the Department of Agriculture, who daily lost fragments of his life amidst the jungle of decaying files.

The axis of his existence was his three-year-old son, Haroon. The boy's mother, Naila, had departed this world a few months before — a gentle soul whom illness had slowly and silently dissolved into dust. Yet in Qurban Khan's being she lingered still, like a faint rustle in an empty corridor.

Whenever her face rose in memory, an old layer of dampness stirred within his heart. He would sit for hours on the charpoy in the courtyard, cradling Haroon, fingers running through the child's hair, lost in the same thought:

"Whom will this child now call 'mother'?"

By nature, Qurban Khan was a man of composure. He spoke little, but when he did, his words seemed like doves released into the air. Naila's death had deepened his silence, yet Haroon's innocent voice lent it strength.

Haroon was precocious in speech, far beyond his years. In the midst of playing with toys, he would often halt and suddenly open a chest of disjointed questions:

"Baba, why is the sky blue?"

"Baba, why do raindrops break upon the earth?"

"Why does this cat keep staring at us?"

And Qurban Khan would answer — now with science, now with fancy, now with mere fables. He believed the soil of a child's imagination was tilled with questions.

After Naila's funeral rites, his family urged him to remarry. His mother, his sisters, even friends at the office echoed the same advice. But Qurban Khan's eyes could not unsee Haroon's face, silenced after calling for his mother in vain. He knew no other woman could become that sacred cradle. He wished to build a new life with his son alone — unburdened by compromise, untouched by intrusion.

In Naila's absence, a gentle emptiness had spread through him. Relatives pressed upon him: "A child cannot grow without a woman's hand," but Qurban knew that mere

presence does not make a mother. He resolved never to marry again. So he left behind the crowded city and journeyed to a far-off town.

It was a place of meadows and ancient pipal trees, where time moved slower, like the measured cadence of an old poet's verse. There he found a modest rented house — two rooms and a courtyard shaded by a blossoming tree whose canopy kept changing the shapes of its shade with the day.

Transferred to this town, Qurban Khan embraced new duties. His mornings began with the dawn prayer, when he would kiss Haroon awake, prepare breakfast, and leave him in the care of an elderly neighbour, Bibi Halima. Once a nurse, now in old age she tended children. Her hands bore the scent of earth, and her voice carried the warmth of motherhood.

By evening, returning weary from office, he found his son's presence dissolving all fatigue. Together they sat in the courtyard: sometimes he narrated stories, sometimes he lost himself in Haroon's unending questions. Yet he knew such moments were fleeting — one day the boy would grow, and these questions, these stubborn giggles, these senseless quarrels would slip across the ramparts of memory.

Meanwhile, Qurban reshaped himself. He learnt to cook, to wash, to iron, to take Haroon to school and back, to

administer medicine, and to sing lullabies at night. These tasks became the rhythm of his existence.

When silence descended at night and the mosque's call echoed faintly from afar, he often wandered into the deserts of his solitude. He knew he had made a momentous choice — and that for every great choice, fate quietly steals away a few small joys.

Night knocked at the windows. The faint yellow glow of the bulb wrapped the room in drowsiness. Upon one charpoy lay the father, half-reclined, head resting against the wall, eyes closed. At the other end of the bed, the small child turned restlessly in his blanket.

"Baba?"

"Yes?"

"Why does the moon run with us when we are in the car?"

"It only seems so, my son. In truth, it is we who are rushing. The moon has walked the same path for centuries."

"Then does the moon never grow tired?"

"No, it simply glows in silence, just as your mother once stayed awake in the night at your bedside, without a word."

"Baba?"

“Yes, my boy?”

“Do the stars speak to us?”

“They do — when we grow quiet enough to hear the language of the heart.”

“What do they say?”

“They say, ‘Dream while you sleep, fulfil those dreams while you wake.’”

“Baba, if I go to the moon, will you come with me?”

“Of course. I could follow you even beneath the earth; the moon is not too far.”

“And if I start to fly, will you hold my hand?”

“I will hold it… and then I will let it go. For when you learn to fly, love itself lies in letting go.”

“Baba, you speak such strange things!”

“Strange things are what you have learnt from me.”

“Baba, how many friends did you have as a child?”

“One. He sat under a mango tree, and we spoke for hours.”

“Is that tree still there?”

“No, my son. With time, it too went to sleep in the earth, as people do… forever.”

“Baba, what is the sleep of death like?”

“Exactly like sleeping in your mother’s lap — safe, silent, soft.”

“Baba, when I grow up, where will you be?”

“In your heart, in your shadow, in your dreams.”

“Baba, don’t ever go away, alright?”

“I promise. So long as you speak to me, I shall remain beside you.”

“Baba, why don’t you ever ask me questions?”

“Shall I? If I ask, will you answer?”

“Yes, of course! Just as you answer mine.”

“Then tell me, son… when you grow big and I grow small, will you still answer my questions?”

“But Baba, how can you grow small?”

“As you grow and forget everything, so do I shrink and remember all.”

“Oh! How strange…”

“Still, promise me you’ll answer.”

“Yes Baba, I promise.”

“Then may I ask?”

“Yes, Baba!”

“My son?”

“Yes?”

“These little birds that chirp upon the roof — do they too keep a clock?”

“No Baba, their clock is within. Nature herself has taught them time.”

“Ah… but when I was your age, I could understand their tongue. Now it sounds only noise.”

“That is because then your heart listened; now your mind listens.”

“Yes… and the mind grows weary, like an old machine rusting.”

“Baba, again your old sayings! Please rest awhile — even your milk has grown cold.”

“That milk no longer tastes as when your mother made it. Then it would sit upon the stove and its fragrance would fill the house…”

“Baba, that was another stove, another time. Now time itself runs — everything vanishes like steam.”

“Running time… yes, even I stumble upon stairs twice now. My backbone cries, ‘Enough!’”

“Baba, I say you should move downstairs; leave the stairs.”

“No, son. I shall remain above. From that window the river is visible — it sounds like your mother’s voice.”

“Baba… you often speak of her.”

“Why should I not? She scented my youth with fragrance that lingers still. You know not what days those were…”

“Baba… stop. It pains me to hear. Please sleep now.”

“My son, may I say one thing?”

“Yes, Baba?”

“Does Time itself grow weary?”

“Sometimes.”

“Then men too grow weary. I… perhaps I am weary now.”

“Baba, you sound sad.”

“No… I only wished to talk with you tonight.”

“Please, rest. Tomorrow you must take your medicine.”

“Yes… medicine. Strange word. In youth, mother gave it; now my son gives it. Only difference — her medicine came with a prayer.”

“Baba, please sleep. We shall talk in the morning.”

“My son?”

“Yes?”

“If I ask something… will you not be angry?”

“Baba, sleep. For God’s sake, sleep. I am so tired — the factory drains me, then the house, the children, the chores — and you keep me awake at night.”

“Very well, my son. I shall sleep. You are weary. Yes… I shall sleep.”

I shall sleep, my son, I shall sleep…

“Baba? Have you slept?”

“…Baba?”

“…Baba??”

The Veil

That moment belonged to no clock. Neither day nor night, neither summer nor winter. Time was a mist that had swallowed every form. No sun flamed, no star trembled. Light and darkness had forgotten their boundaries. It was an instant stretching over centuries, or perhaps centuries condensed into an instant. A moment that no historian ever wrote, nor any clockmaker ever turned a hand for.

Nor could place be named. Perhaps it was space, perhaps a labyrinth, perhaps a forgotten corner of a dream, or one of the underground tunnels of consciousness. There were walls, but they melted at the touch. Roads appeared, but at the placing of a foot, they bent and twisted. Each door that opened closed another. Trees floated with roots dangling in air, and the sky lay pressed against the earth like a lover clinging to his beloved. No map bore this land; no geography contained it.

And that figure?

Neither name nor face did he know. No shadow of the past clung to him, nor any promise of the future. Only an existence, turned into a riddle against itself. His dress belonged to no age, no tribe, no civilisation. In his eyes

floated questions, dreams, phantoms. As though he too were astonished by his own being. As though a mirror stood before him, but the reflection had fled.

He was silent—yet the silence spoke.

In his breath lingered an elegy, like an ancient tale forgotten before its ending. His being was neither broken nor whole: like a statue with a torso intact, but a face never carved.

Time dragged him one way, space bewildered him another, and his own self became a labyrinth to him.

Why was he there?

The question rose not from sky nor earth, but from within—like a scream smothered in silence.

Was he a prisoner? If so, where was the prison—around him, or within?

Was he guilty? If so, of what?

Or was he merely a traveller, who had forgotten his road, while the roads disowned him?

It seemed the universe had veiled itself from him. He looked, but could not comprehend. He listened, but meaning slipped away. Each scene was a symbol, each object a metaphor, each moment a riddle. And he… he was the very axis of that riddle, drowning in the whirlpool of his own pursuit.

That was I.

I was asking myself: “Am I?”

The question rose from some ancient well within me, like an imprisoned cry rebounding at last against the walls of silence. I looked at the lines of my palms—like a script tangled into confusion. Did they conceal the meaning of my being? My fingers trembled, as though afraid of truth. Was my destiny written there, or only dust?

My face?

Had I ever truly seen it? Was it hidden in the mirror, or buried within? Each time I sought to test an image, it blurred—like a picture upon water, scattering at the touch.

I had heard many names:

Prisoner of the within,

Silent scream,

Truth in disguise.

But no name ever reached my essence.

Then what is my identity?

Am I what appears, or what hides? Or what once was, or what never could be?

Are my weakest hours my truest self?

Memories! Some dim, some amputated, some perhaps fabricated. My dreams, my shadows, my fears—together they sketch a figure, but never the whole.

I asked my heart: “Why do you not recognise me?”

It beat on in silence, like a lover living on the memory of his beloved yet forgetting her name.

Am I but an impression?

At times I feel like purity itself; at others, a dark blot upon a white wall.

What is truth?

If I change with every moment, was I ever one? Or am I from eternity a shifting, uncertain, scattered self?

My being is a desert, where each footprint vanishes as it falls. Each road becomes a circle, and each circle brings me face to face with myself—yet I cannot know myself.

I tried to flee myself. Yet every path was woven from my own shadow. Whichever way I ran, the echo of my breath pursued me.

Is my quest futile? Or is my very lostness my identity?

Am I the mirror in which the beholder shatters? Or the face that alters in every mirror?

And then came the question: “Can I bear the weight of my own being?”

It fell like a dagger upon my consciousness. I longed to scream, but the cry perished within.

Perhaps… perhaps my reality is only this—that I am a question, and my only answer is silence.

It was not I, but he. He who asked himself.

The question—“Who am I?”—burned in his soul like a quiet flame that consumes unseen. He sat not, slept not, rested not… only moved. But the journey was of no map, no land. It was a pilgrimage through the crypts of the self.

It was a desert—each grain of sand glittering like a mirror. Wherever he looked, his image stared back: dwarf, giant, youth, old man—each mirror a new face, a new being.

“Are these all me? Or only shards of broken dreams?”

He fled the mirrors, but the desert was vast, and his images chased him, as shadows chase light.

It was a city—full of people, but tongueless. Lips moved, but no sound. Eyes spoke, but their meanings lay shattered. He asked every face for his name, but each reply dissolved into a

silent scream. There he learnt what life is without words—mute, terrifying. And his own inner tongue too seemed struck dumb.

It was a bridge—suspended between past and future, as if two fog-laden shores reached out but never met. Each step revealed his past: childhood's screams, youth's confusions, old age's dread. The bridge swayed, he stumbled. Time had turned into a poisoned swing: ahead nothing, behind only fallen hours.

It was a labyrinth—walls towering, passages twisting, each turn a fresh deceit. Doors whispered but revealed nothing. No path was his; each belonged elsewhere. Sometimes the maze breathed fire, sometimes cold breath, sometimes eyes shone in darkness, sometimes shadows lurked in light. He ran, he wandered—

And then…

At the end of every alley he saw a man—

And that man was himself.

Yet each time, in a new guise, with a new frailty.

One stood tall, proud, eyes gleaming, lips curved in a sneer.

"Who are you?"

“I am you, who despised others, exalted yourself, and mistook honour for power.”

He showed him a beggar extending his hand, while he—the proud self—turned away with contempt:

“These people will never learn; their only place is beneath our feet.”

Another scene—boasting of triumphs as though even God’s decree lay upon his tally.

“Was that me?”

“No, it is you—wrapped in arrogance, thinking yourself higher than heaven.”

And the proud one dissolved like smoke.

Another alley: a child pressed against the wall, trembling, clad in rags.

“Who are you?”

“I am that part of you which feared every choice, which forgot to live for dread of failure.”

The child revealed a dream—an exam never attempted for fear of failing; a love never confessed for fear of refusal.

“Did fear shape my life?”

“No, fear froze it. You made fear your destination.”

And the child melted into mist.

Another passage: a juggler, wand in hand, honeyed words on lips.

“Do you know me? I am you when truth is heavy and falsehood easy.”

He displayed scenes of double-living—truths hidden from friends, feelings from kin, essence from self.

“Was falsehood the yeast of my words?”

“No, it was poison you sipped thinking it perfume.”

The juggler laughed, and his words scattered like butterflies.

Another alley: a stone-like man, eyes dead, heart numb.

“Are you the one who could not stir at another’s pain?”

Scenes unfolded—a mother sick, yet he too busy; a friend in tears, yet he unmoved; a voice calling, but he deaf.

“When did I turn heart to stone?”

“When you deemed feeling weakness, and numbness wisdom.”

The stone shattered into dust.

Final turn: a man in rich garments, eyes hungry, gold coins in hand, yet face branded with want.

“I am that you who was never satisfied.”

He showed—success followed by longing, wealth accompanied by hunger, kin beside him yet loneliness within.

“Then I always craved.”

“Yes. You had all the world, save the peace of the heart.”

And he vanished in the jingle of coins.

The wanderer stood exhausted, suffocated, every alley reflecting some hideous fragment of himself.

A whisper rose: “Are these all me?”

His steps faltered, heart recoiled, but his eyes could not lift away.

A strange weariness descended—not of guilt nor shame, but of the touch of truth.

What now? What now!

A veil!

White, transparent, yet beautiful—like aesthetics clothing a naked soul.

His hand reached, lifted the veil, and gently laid it upon his face.

And as the veil touched—

The world changed. Walls glowed golden, the labyrinth dissolved into fragrance. At every alley's end now stood a radiant, serene face—his own, yet veiled.

The air softened, paths unfolded as though the universe had made peace with his confession.

He stepped forth, and a final door opened—

He was outside.

And the world was transformed:

Dusty winds of the past had become fragrance.

Time, once a circle, had stretched into a straight, luminous road.

Space, once faceless, had blossomed into landscape.

All was clear, unveiled, and beautiful.

He halted, gazed at the sky.

An inner whisper said: “You have hidden yourself, yet in hiding you have found yourself.”

A smile spread upon his lips, though a wound throbbed in his heart—for every weakness, every shadow, every disfigured image was now imprisoned in his consciousness.

He felt the wound within. But outwardly—outwardly he was serene, luminous, adorned.

And so he vowed: “This veil shall never fall.”

Thus he buried his ugliness in the grave of consciousness, and crowned beauty upon his face. He walked upon a new road—each turn radiant, each scene flooded with light.

But behind every light lay a shadow—

and only he knew.

The Shadow

In a remote village of ancient Greece, where seasons passed like the weary breaths of an old farmer, stood a frail hut, its broken walls reciting the elegy of merciless time. Within lived a poor yet diligent man, with his wife and three children. Their daily meal was nothing more than stale bread in clay bowls, dipped in the bitterness of old olive oil. The children's feet were bare, their garments patched, while the wife's eyes resembled half-burnt wood—dimmed, yet still smouldering.

The man's heart wandered each day in search of a new sky, yet his hands returned only with clods of earth. He laboured in the fields of others, but the wage was such that only the hour of hunger could be fixed, never the food itself.

At night, when all slept, he would gaze upon the heavens, seeking some hidden gate—some secret treasure—that might turn his wife's furrows into laughter, place shoes on his children's feet, and straighten his own back, bent beneath the tyranny of toil.

One dawn, before the first light had spilled across the mountains, he slipped quietly from his hut. A tattered satchel hung in his hand, and in his eyes shimmered those dreams which had long been awaiting their own ruin.

On the first day, he wandered to the northern hills where an ancient tale claimed a mighty emperor had hidden his kingdom’s treasure in a cavern. He spent long hours amidst the darkness, but found nothing save the clamour of bats and the chill of stone.

On the second day, he turned south to the marshy forests, where once a saintly beggar had declared that rivers of gold flowed beneath the earth. He dug into the mire, but each time the mud swallowed his dream whole.

On the third day, he went eastward, to the lake. It was said that whosoever beheld the full reflection of the moon upon its surface would learn the secret of treasure. Yet whenever he gazed into the waters, the moon’s face scattered into the shadows of trees.

On the fourth day, he reached the ruins of an ancient town in the west, its stones heavy with hidden secrets. He dug behind a crumbling wall, but unearthed nothing save dust and the debris of time.

Each night he returned to his hut, beheld his sleeping children and silent wife, and each morning set out anew with fresh hope.

On the fifth day, atop a desolate mountain, amid the marriage of mist and sunlight, a luminous vision appeared: a god, with hair silver as moonlight, eyes that pierced horizons, and a golden staff in hand.

The man fell to his knees and said:

“O Lord of power! Hear my cry. My children long for laughter, my wife for peace, and I—only for a single moment when I may not count myself a failure. Grant me wealth, enough that my own no longer deem me small.”

The god spoke gently:

“Know you not, that contentment is richer than gold? Man’s true hunger lies in the heart, not on the platter.”

The man replied:

“Contentment belongs to those who have the choice. My children’s hunger yields neither to contentment nor to philosophy.”

The god answered:

“Greed is a thirst no ocean can quench. If I grant you wealth, I shall strip you of peace.”

The man pleaded:

“If peace dwells in an empty stomach, philosophy is an easy doctrine. But those who starve remember not the soul, only bread.”

The god paused, then said:

“I can give you a sign of treasure—but in return, you must give me something that is yours, and yours alone.”

The man sat in silence, and then spoke inwardly:

“Shall I give my hands? They are my tools of labour; perhaps the god will grant me treasure in their stead.”

Yet a voice rose from within, soft but firm:

“No! These hands are not mere flesh and bone. They are the very vessel of your dignity. With them you have earned bread, cradled your children, and straightened your wife’s veil. If you surrender them, you may gain gold, but how will you guard it?”

Ashamed, he bowed his head.

After a while he thought again:

“Then take my feet, O god! They are but for walking; to lose them for treasure is not too great a price.”

But his inner self replied:

“Feet are not for walking alone. They bear your direction, your struggle, your journey. Should you gain riches yet be unable to move, your treasure will become your prison. Will you buy captivity at the cost of freedom?”

He shuddered, as if retreating from a dark alley.

After some thought, another notion stirred:

“Take my health. My youth is already exhausted with labour. If wealth be mine, I could spend the rest of my days upon a bed.”

The self laughed bitterly, like a madman glimpsed in a mirror:

“Health is the very jewel that makes treasure savoury. If the body aches, a bed of gold feels like thorns. If breath falters, even fragrance is loathed. Do you truly seek riches whose taste you shall never know?”

He froze, as though a hidden truth had been unveiled.

At last, pride stiffened his voice:

“Then take my honour, my name. In poverty who cares for such things?”

The self replied gravely, like a teacher rebuking a foolish pupil:

“Name, honour, reputation—these are the shadows that outlive you. Gain all the wealth of the world, yet if you are forgotten, your fortune shall be stranger to you. You will be like a tree severed from its roots.”

He fell silent. Then a sly thought rose within him.

“Take my mind then! Let me be mad. What matter, if gold surrounds me? Even madness can be a throne.”

The self sighed:

“Mind is the lamp that guides you through darkness. Without it, treasure becomes poison. Wealth in the hand of folly is a curse. Without reason, how shall you know what you have gained and what you have lost?”

For a long moment he was still, as though the universe itself had folded into his silence.

At last a cunning glimmer danced in his eyes. He lifted his face to the heavens and said:

“Then take my shadow! It is neither flesh, nor soul, nor reason. It walks only in sunlight and vanishes in the dark. It serves no purpose, bears no cost. I have no need of it.”

At that instant his self stirred, as if to protest, a word rising to his lips—

But he silenced it:

“Be still! My decision is made. This shadow, my possession, I offer to the god.”

A thunderous voice resounded. The god smiled, nodded, and as the shadow touched his hand—the man himself faded from existence.

His hands, his feet, his mind, his senses remained—but no eye beheld him, no heart perceived him. With his shadow gone, he too had vanished.

He who once had walked barefoot upon the thorns of poverty was now crowned with treasure—gold, silver, flocks, servants, fragrant halls, wealth flowing like a river. The god had kept his word.

Yet amidst the splendour, he himself was absent.

In daylight he stood beneath trees, but no mark fell upon the earth. His wife peered through the window and drew the curtain. His children played in the courtyard, passing by him with empty eyes, as if blind to his being.

He touched walls, called aloud, but the air stood still, refusing echo.

One day he saw his son slip from the balcony of the palace. He rushed to catch him, but his hand hovered in air. The child fell—saved by a servant’s arms.

That night he sat in the courtyard. In the lamplight, beneath his feet, no shadow lay. Then his self, still breathing faintly within, spoke one final time:

“See, you could not save even yourself from absence. Your desire was fulfilled, yet you were cast out of its world. You became lord of wealth, but no longer a traveller of life. You have a body, but no image—for an image is only that which finds reflection in another’s gaze.”

He uttered no word.

At dawn, while his family feasted in the palace courtyard, he stood near—so near—yet outside their imagination.

His wife recalled the past:

“Life never stays the same; it has its rises and falls. Once we had only poverty, and your father left us in that state, never thinking what would become of us. Had we not found that pot of jewels, what would have become of us?”

The youngest daughter whispered:

“Mother, sometimes it feels as though someone moves near us, sighing—but no one is there.”

Then she fell silent, glancing about as though straining to hear what could not be heard.

Death

When the blackness of night tangled itself with the cemetery walls and began to scream, and the moonlight scattered, trembling, over the marble of graves, I — sitting in the broken house near the cemetery's farthest corner — would sometimes search the flame of my lamp for the reflection of death, sometimes strain to hear its footsteps in the warm, loamy breath of the earth. I was bound to life, certainly, yet swollen with its opposite — a captive of death.

That question robbed me of the day's and night's calm: what, after all, is death?

A shadow?

A breeze?

Or a solid being?

From where does it come?

At whose door does it knock and when?

And why is its knock so absolute, so final?

Often these questions echoed inside me like a whisper awakening my inner sense. I lived in a house whose other side watched funerals pass by every day. I had seen a newborn lifted from a mother's lap and laid into the grave's embrace; I had found the old silently laid upon timber boards. Yet what wounded me most was the same bewilderment that marked all their faces at the last moment — as if each desired some knowledge they could not attain.

I mused that if death could be imprisoned, perhaps humanity could inhale the breath of eternal carefreeness. Does death reside in a house? Does it arrive along a particular route? What is its geography? What language does it speak? Does it grow tired? Are its moments fixed, or does it flow from eternity to eternity?

I gathered solitude within me and cast my sleeps into a desert of questions until, on a night when the moon was veiled in unusual whiteness and the winds unusually still, I asked myself:

"Can one touch death? If I could follow its footsteps, learn its secret, perhaps man's oldest fear could be overcome."

That thought pushed at the borders of madness. I erased time from my memory and place from my sight. For me thereafter was neither town nor village nor location — only a quest, a wandering metaphor for a question. Far from the graveyard

lights I looked at my house one last time, shut the door, and set out in search of death.

This was not an ordinary journey but an inward voyage, leaping the frontiers of dream and fancy. Its destination was death itself; its path the tangled meanings of life.

I remember a day, after a funeral had passed, when I said to myself, “If death must come, why not go to hear the echo of its steps? Why not touch it and find out whether it is terror or consolation?” Thus my journey began — a pursuit bound to neither time nor place, a chase undertaken by one wearied of life’s meanings and bent on understanding its end.

First I went to a wood where the tree branches looped round each other’s necks and scowled at the sky. There the sunlight descended like suffocating heat, and shadows—those shadows—did not follow man from behind; they walked inside him. At every step I felt observed, yet when I turned I heard only the groan of rotting leaves. One twig brushed my face; I thought perhaps it was Death’s finger, but it was only green wood — yet it left, strangely, a wound. In the forest I felt constantly that death was somewhere present, its form dissolved into the winds and its murmur merged with the grass.

Then I climbed those mountains called the “Pillars of Silence.” There was neither birdsong nor running water, only

a stillness so profound that even the sound of my breath seemed foreign. On every summit I looked for death's reflection, but found only my own.

From a crack in the rock a voice called, "Have you come to seek me? I am hidden within you!" I was startled, groped over the stones, but they were cold, insensate, indifferent, as if death had already made them its part.

I flew towards the sky, supported by a beacon of light, where clouds' bodies pulsed with lightning's veins. The stars looked like the universe's eyes, and in their lids was the glitter of death. On the brink of a galaxy I saw a faint glimpse of death, as if a scarf had fluttered and vanished into air. A voice said, "Do you seek me? I am in every star that dies, in the rot of every nebula, in the last scream of every supernova!"

Then I descended into the earth's layers, into tunnels devoid of air and light. On every wall there were scratch marks as if many had tried to return from there and death had arrested them. There was a silence there too, but it was damp, stifling, as if some ancient being still slept in its chest. On one bone I found the word 'death' scratched, but it was a trick; the bone itself spoke: "I am what remains after death — where death itself dwells, no one knows!"

I smashed a mirror and tumbled into another world behind it. Everything was inverted here: time ran backwards; trees did

not grow from the earth upwards but from the sky down; human faces were translucent. Here death appeared to me as an image — a girl sitting with her eyes shut, and yet her face bore a shadow, a fear that even blackened the light. I reached to touch her; the moment my finger neared, she rose up and vanished into flame.

I tore through time's walls and reached that threshold where past, present and future meet. There, babies were being born and old age's lines were falling upon faces simultaneously. I saw death in every time — it was not imprisoned in a single moment but hidden in the knots of instants, like silence tucked among the strings of an instrument.

Then I visited a realm where there was neither weight nor direction. Everything hung suspended in itself, around itself, stiff in its own insistence. There I saw death as a luminous thread stretched between sky and earth. I reached to touch it; as my hand extended, it fled like a scream.

That… was Death. But what kind of death? Neither illusion nor deliverance from illusion. Neither face nor mask, yet the eyes wandered. At one instant she stood before me as a lovely maiden; her body gave off no fragrance, yet evoked a memory of a season that had never been. Her eyes were not blue but like deep wells into which time sinks and sobs.

Then in the same breath her second face emerged — a trembling, terrifying woman whose hair writhed like snakes of the black night and whose visage seemed to hide the last cry of every dying man. There was no colour in her eyes, only void, a blind well of annihilation.

She was one being — the fusion of beauty and dread — as though the universe wanted to kill itself with its own loveliness.

For a few moments I could not speak. My lips were motionless, my tongue heavy. I swallowed, then addressed her: “Are you Death?”

She smiled. In that smile flowers opened and graves bloomed.

“Yes,” she said, “I am what you have called a secret for centuries.”

“How do you come?” I asked. “From where? How may one escape you?”

She grew serious and spoke, and her tone was so soft it could deafen the ear, yet so terrifying it could halt the heart’s beating: “I do not come and I do not go. I am everywhere. I hide in your shadow; I breathe in the beat of your pulse. You imagine my arrival when I place a mirror before you.”

I shivered. “Then… how may one escape you? Is there a way?”

She was silent for a while, as if weighing her answer — or perhaps the silence itself was a test. Then she said, her voice at once tender and dreadful, “If one comes behind me and touches my shoulder, I turn. The moment my eyes meet theirs, frozen with fear, their body trembles, they collapse, swoon, and die…”

I listened as though an old scripture’s secrets were unfolding. “…But if one comes before me and touches my brow — that is, looks into my eyes without trembling or fear and lays a hand upon my forehead — then that person gains a long life. For they have accepted death, and an accepted death transforms into life.”

I was mute. She smiled and the redness of the sky deepened. Then she said, “Now I shall go. If you wish, you may touch me. But from behind or from the front? The choice is yours.”

With that she moved. Her gait was neither hurried nor slow, as if time itself parted to make way for her.

And I — I stood there, having decided to follow her.

The moment Death revealed her brow was an epiphanic moment. I saw not only a secret in her smile but a challenge,

as if she had said, “Now see, what will you do with this knowledge?”

I followed her — without fear in my intention, without weariness in my steps. I thought that if I could come before her and touch that brow, I would become immortal. One moment, one touch… and life would be endless.

But death is not a straight line; it is a wandering shadow that hides sometimes in rocks, sometimes in clouds, sometimes in the deep of the sea, sometimes in the shimmer of mist. I saw her in a desert’s horrific storm — a flash of lightning that lit the horizon and then vanished. I felt her on the snowy peaks where the cold itself seemed to hide. Once I saw her in a dream — but was that dream a deception of my waking mind or a stratagem of Death? I could not say.

She approached me as the scent of narcissus, as the sinful delight that tests the soul, as the back of a woman in a deserted alley, as the eyes of a child sitting under a scorched banyan. I recognised her though she kept changing her face.

This pursuit was not only through paths; it was a spiritual trial, an anguish that became neither burden nor solace. Death would come before me and vanish as if a secret had revealed itself and then been erased.

One day, after she had hidden behind blue clouds, I tried to rend the sky. On another, when she descended into the earth’s

bowels, I dived into the depths to search for her whisper. Sometimes she was in another moment of time — I tried to twist instants; sometimes in another dimension — I tore the void — yet my hands found nothing.

I felt I would never grow weary. Then — the moment for which I had spent countless instants arrived. Somewhere in a mist, at the edge of a nameless wood, on the breast of a naked stillness I was walking when I felt a cold touch — upon my shoulder. Exactly as Death herself had said: calm, yet shivering; gentle, yet decisive. I started and looked back. A man stood there — wonder in his eyes and trembling on his lips. He had walked behind me — perhaps a fellow traveller of my dreams. He had touched me. His eyes met mine.

At first he was still, then his lips trembled, his body convulsed, the ground slid from beneath his feet, and at last he fell to the earth — insensible, lifeless.

He was dead

The Doll

The dawn had not yet fully descended upon the town's narrow lanes when the first shadow of news began to tremble upon the walls of the bazaar. A news more scorching than the day's sun, more dreadful than the night's darkness: the only son of a powerful political leader had been kidnapped. The same child who, with his cap tilted backwards, often bought sweets from the confectioner's stall at the street's corner under the gaze of his guards — now lay captive in the dungeons of an unknown night.

The town, outwardly calm, now throbbed with a hidden uproar. Outside the politician's bungalow police vans lined the road; boots of uniformed men thudded like drums of dread; and the furrowed brows of officers became a theatre of unease. Yet this theatre

as no mere spectacle: behind it lurked the trembling that invades the chest of the mighty when something slips beyond their grasp.

The leader, hailed in public rallies as the "Servant of the Nation," now seemed fearful of his own nation. His eyes bore no trace of sleep, his lips no longer spoke the language of

promises. He asked only questions: “Who has done this? Why? And why me?” His voice quivered like the very legs of a throne when they begin to shake.

The abductors had left a brief letter: “Five thousand rupees, before sunset tomorrow, in the courtyard of the old mansion. Otherwise the child… do men like you weep as well?”

That letter was not ink upon paper but a slap upon the face of the State — a declaration that the walls of power had cracked.

The police, swift as lightning when chasing the petty crimes of common folk, now stood frozen in bewilderment. District officers, entangled in telephone wires, dangling between orders and threats, searched desperately for a “name” — a scapegoat, a face upon which the blanket of accusation could be laid. Yet that face was missing, as if this time tyranny had left no trace.

The child was found at the appointed place and hour. His lips trembled, his clothes were torn, his eyes haunted with fear — but he sat silent. The kidnappers, however, had vanished like mist, as though they had been but a dream, leaving no footprint upon waking.

When the leader clasped the boy in his arms, a fleeting dew of tears descended into his eyes. Yet politics soon hardened that dew into the language of command. Turning to the officers, he declared:

“If you bring me not the culprits, you too are culprits. I want results. The people demand answers.”

Kala — a name once written not in ink but in the breath of fear across the city’s alleys. Once he was the uncrowned sovereign of these streets. No throne in his hand, no crown upon his head, yet silence bowed before his steps and shadows clung about his feet.

His true name? Perhaps Bilal… perhaps Majid… or perhaps some invention. But the city’s weathered walls knew him as Kala — the man who disappeared in daylight and became manifest in the night.

His childhood bore the scars of poverty. He grew under melting roofs where hunger was his mother’s lullaby and shame his father’s gaze. Poverty did not make him meek; it forged in him a furnace of hate. He forgot mercy and ran recklessly down the foggy lanes of lawlessness.

His crimes were many, but his loot was never flesh — only things. Things that were dreams to others but mere spoils to him. He did not simply pickpocket or smash shopfronts; he mingled in political gatherings and stole watches, chains, and even identities.

Once, he raided the city’s grandest gambling den alone. It was whispered that he entered stealthily in the dark, and when he left, even the moon looked stolen from his hands.

The police tried often to ensnare him, yet he slipped away each time — as if they had tried to imprison the wind.

Yet of all the things he could steal, he never stole peace. At night, when lights went out and clamour stilled, he lay staring at the ceiling — perhaps at a moving shadow, perhaps his own, now chasing him.

Crime became his profession, profession his habit. But like every habit, weariness seeped into it. Newspapers announced his arrest many times, but the very next day came the denial. For the law never truly caught him — or perhaps never dared. Thus, he became Kala — alive only in files, embodied in tales, yet absent in reality, like a dream inked in darkness that a drop of water erases.

Sometimes in the oldest of walls a crack appears, through which a thin thread of light slips in — and that single ignored beam changes a destiny.

Bilal, once called Kala, now chose the simple name Billu — as though he had buried the burden of the past at midnight. He had returned from the valley of crime to the field of life, weary but alive, with life knocking anew at his door.

The change began with a small moment — one night in a deserted lane he found a wounded child lying by the roadside. He stopped, perhaps for the first time. He lifted the boy,

traced Bismillah upon the blood-soaked shirt with his finger, and ran towards the hospital.

That run left his inner shadow far behind.

At the hospital was Zainab — a slender nurse with pools of light in her eyes. She made Bilal realise for the first time that touch need not mean a grip; it could also mean gentleness. She asked no questions, opened no file of his past. After a few meetings she merely said:

“If you truly wish to change, make someone your hope.”

She became that hope, and soon accident turned into bond.

Time blessed them with a little fairy — Amna, whose cry echoed Bilal’s name, whose laughter carried the music of future days, whose eyes reflected the first glimpse of paradise.

They now lived in a modest two-roomed house in a humble yet clean quarter. By day Bilal laboured in a factory owned by a retired police officer — a man who knew Bilal’s past but kept him as a trophy. When dignitaries visited, he would summon Bilal proudly:

“This man was once a notorious criminal; now he works honestly under my roof.”

It was as if Bilal were made to wear a medal of repentance. Yet he never objected. He knew respect's door often opens through the stairway of display.

Each morning he rose on time, kissed Amna's brow, sipped Zainab's tea, and left silently for work. Life felt like walking a rope — beneath the abyss of his past, above the sky of hope.

For Amna's birthday he had promised her a doll — the grandest of dolls, clothed in pink, shimmering like his daughter's dream. He had saved from his meagre wages, and told Zainab:

"This year Amna's birthday will shine like the sparkle in her eyes."

But the city hung heavy with unease. Newspapers had dried of ink, yet their words still smouldered: "Crime committed, culprits unknown." The people demanded "known," the rulers demanded rest.

Police uniforms were lined with worry, voices trembled with excuses. A single question haunted the offices:

"From where shall a culprit be brought?"

An order descended: "We need a specimen — not justice, but appeasement."

The retired officer, seated in his chamber, smoking amid the haze of fate, let his eyes fall upon Bilal's file. The same Bilal he once displayed with pride could now become the sacrifice for his friends' salvation.

A phone call later, to his old comrade DSP Khalid, the trap was cast.

"There's a man… an ex-criminal, reformed. He can complete your story."

"But he's now—""Yes, I know. But truth today is what the news declares. All else is fable."

And destiny moved with merciless swiftness.

That evening, after finishing his toil and buying Amna's dream-doll from the bazaar, Bilal was halted midway by two angels in uniform — smiles veiling venom, gentleness masking doom.

In the courtyard, dusk fell softly, like the shadow of a dream. Amna sat on her tiny chair, henna upon her palms, ribbons in her hair, eyes sparkling with the light only children know on birthdays.

In one corner lay the pink dress Zainab had stitched with threads of love and prayers knotted into every seam.

Amna looked again and again to the door, listening in every passing step for her father's tread.“Mama, when will Baba come? He promised me a big doll.”

Zainab said nothing, only turned her face to wipe a tear. For since noon she had seen the shadow of truth lowering upon their courtyard.

Then, at dusk, a police jeep halted. Two officers entered quietly, heads bowed, faces draped in feigned sorrow.

One merely whispered:

“Madam, you must come with us… to the station… there…”

Zainab asked nothing, not with eyes nor lips. She only held Amna's hand and followed.

The station hall was cold and dark, its walls like an ancient tomb where history lay chained in slumber.

In the corner stood a long table, draped with a white sheet. From its edge a line of dried blood trailed — like the severed throat of a dream.

And near it lay a doll — in pink attire, but with a broken head, an arm twisted, and blood marking the hollow of its eye.

Amna ran, seized the doll, caressed its face, and tears suddenly streamed down.

“Mama! My doll is broken…”

She said no more, but sat upon the floor, sobbing.

The Bargain of Love

In this European city of marble and glass, two shadows drifted together as though they were yellowing autumn leaves, dancing to the concord of the wind.

In the ancient, colonnaded lecture hall of the Medical University, Eliza and Andrea would often be found sitting side by side on the last bench. At first it was mere coincidence, then companionship, and at length, a bond that crept quietly beyond the province of words.

They were students of medicine; yet, amidst that desert of anatomy and diagnosis, a secret spring gushed forth in the recesses of their hearts — a stream that defied the scalpel of reason. Andrea's eyes carried a smouldering light, as if probing into fathomless depths; Eliza's smile bore the dewy tenderness that could summon green shoots in the barren fields of the soul.

Oft at twilight they lingered beneath the olive trees in the hospital's garden, tossing pebbles of words into the river of conversation, watching ripples rise, dissolve, and awaken afresh.

What drew them together was no mere sentiment, nor outward charm; it was a spiritual concord — a silent note, resonating upon some ancient instrument of the universe. In such moments, Time seemed to mislay its own pulse; space and geography dissolved into nothingness. It was as though two mortal vessels had converged, only to overhear the whispering of their innermost elements.

Eliza would often murmur:

“Medicine is but the science of the body — yet who shall heal the heart?”

And Andrea would reply:

“He who knows the music of its beating… perhaps you.”

Thus their union stole out of the examination hall and entered the grand laboratory of life itself. They learnt how to lull pain to sleep, how a single touch could fill the abyss of solitude.

One day, within the ancient chapel of the University, beneath frescoed walls where forgotten histories glimmered faintly, Andrea knelt and asked:

“Will you be the perpetual patient of my heart’s hospital?”

Tears and laughter mingled in Eliza’s eyes — and in that mingling their love drew its first breath of a new existence.

On their wedding day, through the marble streets of the same city, their procession passed; each window seemed a mute witness to their tale. Eliza wore white, adorned with golden threads as fine as the embroidery of dreams. Andrea's face was suffused with a tranquillity like the sea smiling after storm.

Their friends whispered:

"They are but two faces of the same soul."

And perhaps it was so.

Life bound them together — two bodies, one breath; two hearts, one rhythm.

A new season dawned upon them after marriage — not the season chronicled in almanacs nor chained to clock-hands, but a season birthed from the blossoming of hearts.

They dwelt in a modest but serene home, its windows opening to Roman rooftops that glowed green, blue, and gold at dusk. Their rooms carried the fragrance of books, the murmurs of old wooden shelves, the soft tread of Time itself.

They touched each other's wounds not as physicians, but as lovers. A cup of tea offered in a quiet moment became their highest token of affection. They had discovered that the greatest sign of love lies in the harmony of silence.

On rainy evenings, when drops beat gently upon the panes, Eliza would close her book and gaze at Andrea:

“Do you know, love is an alchemy — one soul dissolving into another?”

And Andrea would smile:

“Yes — an alchemy unseen, yet irrevocable; like perfume that, once spilt, becomes fragrance in the air.”

Years ripened. Their profession remained the axis of their days, yet the love between them transcended the neat lines of their medical charts.

Eliza would say:

“To touch a patient’s heart is greater than any drug.”

Andrea would answer:

“And the only cure for a lover’s heart lies in another lover’s heart.”

Once a week they wandered to the old art museum, standing before Renaissance canvases, speaking in silent metaphors. Eliza would point to some sorrowful eyes in a painting and whisper:

“Is not the touch of annihilation hidden in this love?”

Andrea would reply:

“And annihilation is but the summit of eternity.”

Thus their love grew not merely in the moments of living, but in the chambers of art, knowledge, and soul.

Years passed. Success crowned them — both became esteemed physicians. Yet their richest possession was the completeness of one another. Sometimes Andrea, sitting late by the window, would say:

“Your existence is the truest miracle in this universe.”

And Eliza, her hair now gently dishevelled, would answer tenderly:

“And you are my every dawn — a gift of wonder and of gratitude.”

Their intimacy transcended flesh; it was the deep closeness granted only to souls forged of one breath since eternity.

But along every perfumed path lies a hidden thorn — and this thorn was waiting.

One spring evening, fate turned its wheel. Death seldom announces itself; it slips in unbidden, like a black mist stealing through the lattice of night.

A sudden crash, a shattering flash — and silence’s abyss engulfed them.

Eliza awoke upon a hospital's cold white bed. Her first cry was:

"Andrea?"

"Intensive care," whispered the nurse, lowering her gaze.

Andrea lay ensnared in wires and tubes, his mind crushed by injury, his breath dependent upon machines. Doctors decreed: if consciousness returned by morning, there was hope; otherwise, silence eternal.

That night Eliza was allowed to sit by his side. Alone, amidst the sigh of monitors and fragile beeps like distant bells in an abandoned temple, she clasped his still hand.

Her heart recalled an ancient tale her grandmother once told — the story of Babur and Humayun. The emperor who prayed to give his life for his son. The plea was answered: the son lived, the father perished.

"This," thought Eliza, "was love's bargain — the trade where annihilation becomes the currency of devotion."

She trembled, whispering into the night:

"Am I too capable of such a bargain? If my life could rekindle his flame — take me, O Lord, and grant him breath."

Her prayer grew fiercer. Shadows of the hospital walls seemed like Death's sentinels.

Suddenly, Andrea's graph stirred — a flicker, a tremor of life. Hope's golden bird fluttered in her chest. But in the same moment, Eliza felt her own body sinking, her breath growing heavy, her sight dimming. It was as though her very essence were flowing into Andrea.

"This is what I asked… this is the price…"

Andrea's pulse strengthened; hers faltered. He revived; she waned.

In that solemn hour she rose, trembling, and with hands of ice pulled the wires from the machines. Silence fell — a silence deeper than any sound.

Eliza collapsed upon her chair, tears streaming, her heart broken upon the altar of love.

Her husband's death was a wound too deep for any healer — a wound borne only by the soul.

The Preparation

Amidst the sun-drenched shadows of Punjab, there stood a mansion like a half-forgotten haveli, its walls engraved by the silver pen of Time. This house was not merely a dwelling but the very emblem of the village — the seat where Nawab Fakhruddin Khan had lived his days in splendour, dignity, and measured grace.

From his attire to his speech, a fragrance of civilisation seemed to linger — the refinement of generations distilled into one presence. He was not only a landholder but also a custodian of knowledge, culture, and manners. In his words glowed the delicacy of Ghalib's ghazals; in his bearing, the courtly elegance of Mir.

His life was an heirloom passed down like a family sword, and now mirrored in his four sons — four pillars upon which the edifice of legacy stood. The eldest, Sirajuddin, lived with him, a living portrait of a dutiful son. The other three, settled in their own houses within the same village, carried the torch in different ways: one a teacher, another a lawyer, the third a trader — each chiselling his name in honour by treading his father's footsteps.

The Nawab's chamber was a sanctum: sandalwood breathed its perfume, Persian tomes whispered on the shelves, and history itself seemed to speak through his reminiscences. To sit in his company was to taste a banquet not only of food but of literature, wisdom, and laughter.

Discipline and affection ruled his household. Mornings began with Qur'anic recitation, noons with conversation, evenings with measured strolls, and nights with a gathering at the dinner table. His life was like a well-recited verse — balanced, dignified, purposeful.

In that room hung the family sword, gleaming with ancestral pride, and opposite it, the fading photographs of childhood, relics of innocence. To his sons he was a great tree whose shade offered comfort, protection, and continuity. Sirajuddin, the eldest, served him as though service itself were a form of prayer — arranging his robes, tending to his medicines, smoothing his pillow with devotion.

Yet the lamp of life, though still glowing, had begun to flicker. Nawab Sahib had crossed eighty; strength remained, but the marrow of his bones bore the fatigue of time.

That day he was uncharacteristically silent. He neither called for his morning tea nor summoned a servant. His face bore the pallor of autumn leaves; his breath dragged under an unseen weight. Sirajuddin sat at his bedside, his eyes

darkened with dread, as though some prowler of the night had given warning of its presence.

The physician, Hakim Abdul Aziz, was hurriedly summoned. He placed his silver instrument upon the Nawab's wrist, paused, and in a silence heavy as earth itself, turned to the son:

"Pray, child. This night may well be your father's last."

A dagger seemed to pierce Sirajuddin's heart. He left the room, pressed his forehead against the wall, and wept softly. But then, like a soldier startled awake, he straightened:

"Inform everyone at once. Call the Maulvi Sahib, and summon Mir Hasan to prepare for the funeral."

The house fell beneath a mourning cloud. Servants moved like shadows; sobs echoed against the walls. Siraj called for his trusted aide, Iqbal:

"Fetch the tailor, Mola Bakhsh. Tell him to finish stitching the shroud — the white satin kept in Baba Sahib's chest. And send for perfume and attar from the city — the very fragrance used at Shah Ji's last fateha. Give the man fifty rupees, so he wastes no time."

Orders flowed like water from his lips, though his heart was drowning. Men were sent to dig the grave beside his mother's resting place. The kitchen was instructed to prepare for the

coming guests: halwa-puri in the morning, qorma at noon, chickpeas and pilau by dusk. Even the hens were accounted for — their sacrifice already written in fate.

Meanwhile, Siraj stole back into the chamber again and again, gazing at his father's whitening face, his dimming eyes, his faltering breaths that trembled like the wings of a caged bird readying for flight.

Night deepened. From afar, the mosque's azaan quivered in the air. Siraj, with his own hands, bathed his father's face, anointed his brow with attar, rubbed camphor upon his palms. Each gasp of breath carried a hiccup — the soul rehearsing for its departure.

The brothers had gathered, the guests had arrived, and Siraj alone bore the heaviest grief. He had oiled his father's beard, massaged his feet through sleepless nights, and filled their silences with childhood stories. Now he was the sentinel at death's threshold.

At dawn, the death was declared. A strange hush descended upon the village. Even the birds upon the branches sat motionless, as if stunned into reverence.

By noon, the Maulvi Sahib had arrived; the shroud was ready; the grave complete. The bier was lifted. Women peered from rooftops, children stood silently at doorways. The Maulvi, who had always spoken to the Nawab with

folded hands, now wept aloud while reciting Qur'anic verses. The air was laden with a silence deeper than any cry — a silence that screamed within the heart.

At the graveyard, prayers rose with the dust of the earth. As the shrouded body was lowered into the soil, the Nawab stirred briefly, murmuring:

"First he gave the azaan, now he is buried… What muezzin is this, who called me to prayer, yet himself lay down facing the qibla?"

His words hung in the air, suspended like a frozen moment, as though Time itself had ceased its motion, as though the sun had halted its light, as though the earth had not only embraced Siraj but also stolen him from his father's heart.

That same evening, Nawab Fakhruddin Khan lay again upon his bed. But now his face bore the reflection of a silent azaan — one that awakens the soul, yet lulls the body into an eternal sleep.